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Thresholds 15

Creativity in Consumer Culture

Fall 1997

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The Art Guys in Suits 6 Carol Burns on Sprawl 13 Rakowitz under the cap 55

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Department of Architecture

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as the Commodity

ADVERTISEMENT ADVERTISEMENT ADVERTISEMENT

TERT AURENCE SEE PORTRAIT OF THE COMMODITY AS A YOUNG IDEA SECTION

SUITS: THE CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

Ladies and Gentlemen: The Art Guys (have left the building.)

COMMENTARY BY JAMES P. O'BRIEN AND GREG RUSSELL

THE ART GUYS WILL MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO APPEAR AT AS MANY EVENTS AS POSSIBLE THROUGHOUT 1998 TO FURTHER EXTEND THE VISIBILITY OF THE **SUITS** *AND THE CLIENTS REPRESENTED ON THEM.*

Events and appearances: Todd Oldham's Spring Show, NY / The Academy Awards, LA / Cannes Film Festival, France / MTV Music Awards, LA / Whitney Museum, NY / Guggenheim, NY / The National Gallery, DC /The Late Show with David Letterman / Rosie O'Donnell / The Winter Olympic Games, Utah / The Boston Marathon / NFL Football Games

- from *Suits: The Clothes Make the Man, project itinerary.*

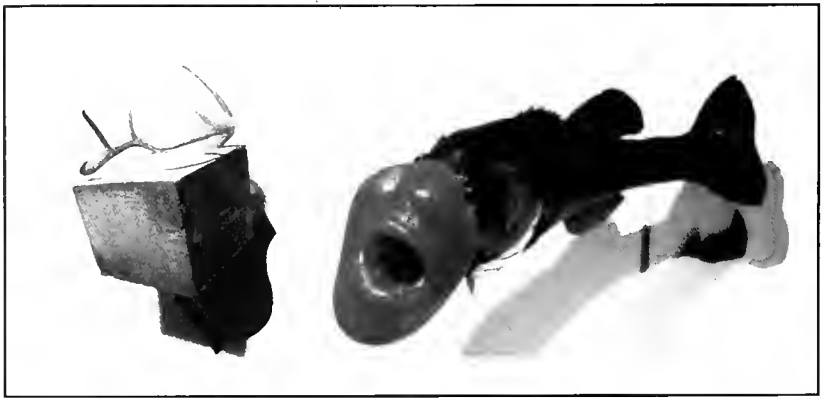
In calendar year 1998 The Art Guys will enact their well-planned *Suits: The Clothes Make the Man* project. Despite the varied physical appearances and manifestations of their previous works (in performance, video, photography, sculpture and assemblage,) in the Suits project they retain a certain consistency. How? The Art Guys act repeatedly with twin methods: OBSESSIVE BEHAVIOR and THE ARTIST AS FOOL.

These twin METHODS have allowed them to employ such TECHNIQUES as a good-natured WRONGHEADEDNESS *(fig.1)*, a routine TAKING OF WORDS AND ACTIONS AT FACE VALUE (that is: literally,) *(fig.2)*, a profane appropriation of consumer uses of everyday stuff taken to illogical conclusions in 'PRODUCT TESTING' *(fig.4)*, and a naive interest in performing and videotaping themselves as fools JUST TO SEE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF... *(fig.3)*

But their work says and does things beyond those TECHNIQUES. Likewise it needs to be understood beyond the common terms (used in many write-ups of their work,) such as: "you either think they're jokesters or part of the self-referential discourse of postmodern art," or, if they are art, "you either love them or hate them." The Suits

FIGURE 1. **1,000 COATS OF PAINT: TELEPHONE** 1990-91. telephone, 1,000 coats of latex paint, glass, brass plaque. *left above:* in progress, *right above:* finished state, *left:* paint chart and brushes. In seven months, 1,000 coats of variously colored paint was applied.

below: FIGURE 2. *left* **BLOCKHEAD** 1996. Deer trophy, concrete. *right* **LARGEMOUTH BASS** 1997. Bass trophy, plastic lips. "We are currently working on a series of pieces involving animal trophies. Included are a 'goat phone' that actually works, with a horn acting as a receiver, a wild boar wearing clown makeup & wig that laughs at you as you pass by... Living in Texas, we find the theme of hunting and fishing rich and irresistible." - *The Art Guys.*



THE ART GUYS WITH TODD OLDHAM

above: FIGURE 3. **BULK UP FOR CAM** 1994-95. Silver gelatin prints. Before and after photos of a 12-month body conditioning project preparing for survey exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, culminating in an unveiling performance at Lebare, a ladies' club in Houston.

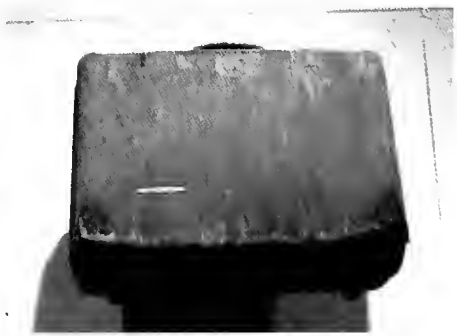
below: FIGURE 4. **PRODUCT TEST #1: SUITCASE DRAG, HOUSTON TO SAN ANTONIO, HIGHWAY 90A, 234.7 MILES** 1987. Suitcase and brass plaque, type c print. Suitcase was attached to truck bumper, dragged to San Antonio and installed as finished product at Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio.

project featured here shows The Art Guys' best effort to date going well beyond those terms.

The Suits. (FOLLOWING PAGES)

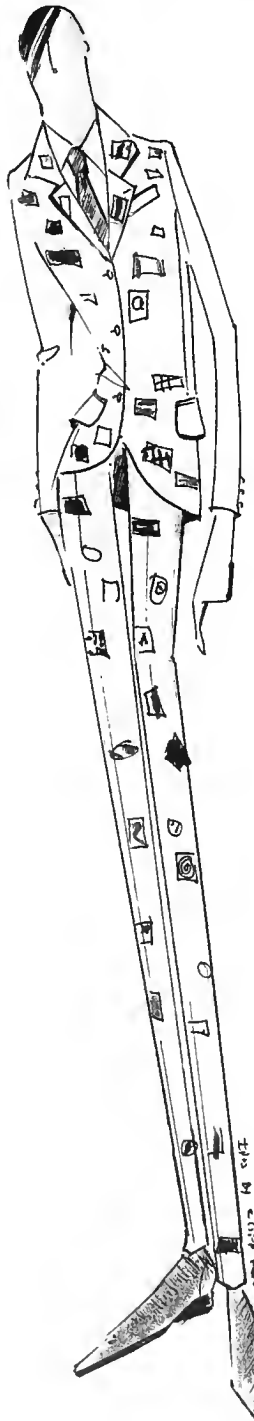
As advertising expands its points of visibility and availability everywhere, the high cultural worlds, through which The Art Guys will circulate with their Suits, continue to do their best to resist revealing this expansion. With The Suits project The Art Guys employ OBSESSIVE BEHAVIOR and THE ARTIST AS FOOL to illuminate this site of tremendous repression in the cultural worlds of art, fashion, and media. Specifically, the OBSESSIVE BEHAVIOR in this case becomes an illogical amount of marketing on a suit. THE ARTIST AS FOOL is the simple wearing of that suit.

Art world marketing usually looks something like a public service. By merely wearing the Suits in high culture circles that don't yet embrace their advertising motifs as their own, The Art Guys may well break everyone's concentration - ruin everyone's good time. Their Suits will make us cringe upon seeing them worn—in all the wrong places—with their NASCAR style advertising motif so recognizable. They will put any illusions of a cultured life on pause. All of us who are offended by them will turn into the hyper-critical *Popular High School Crowd*—we will utter, "ech, what are they doing here?" like the fashion mavens, cheerleaders and quarterbacks upon merely seeing a clueless plain jane or geek in the cafeteria.



THE ART GUYS WITH TODD OLDHAM

TODD OLDHAM
4
THE ART GUYS



the art of dressing

SUITS

The Clothes Make The Man

The Art Guys
with Todd Oldham

With the Suits project The Art Guys will reach, theoretically and literally, an almost poetic articulation of their position over the last 15 years of collaboration. How? (1) Their "media" is at the most abstracted and powerful level of everyday stuff around: marketing. (2) They take their WRONGHEADEDNESS through cross-cultural production (that is to say, from art through fashion, media and popular cultures.) (3) They take the ARTIST AS FOOL's bald-faced commentary on the terms of acceptability in high culture to the actual SITES of the production of those terms. (See the Suits Project Itinerary above.) (4) They pick up a sidekick along the way: *haute couture*'s Todd Oldham.

Let's talk about that last point. In the world of fashion, such an un-aesthetic and unconcerned ad-hoc approach to exterior appearance and design as the Suits project illustrates, seems extremely out of place. Indeed it appears to be against the rules. Ads on well-designed suits are unnecessary really, because *haute couture* already has a way to design an ad for itself: the designer's signature style. The "label" is generally concealed in *haute couture*, (whereas *prêt-a-porter* can be more 'obvious') the "signature style" is not. The thing is, The Art Guys don't have a signature style– they only have signature METHODS.

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ART GUISE ART
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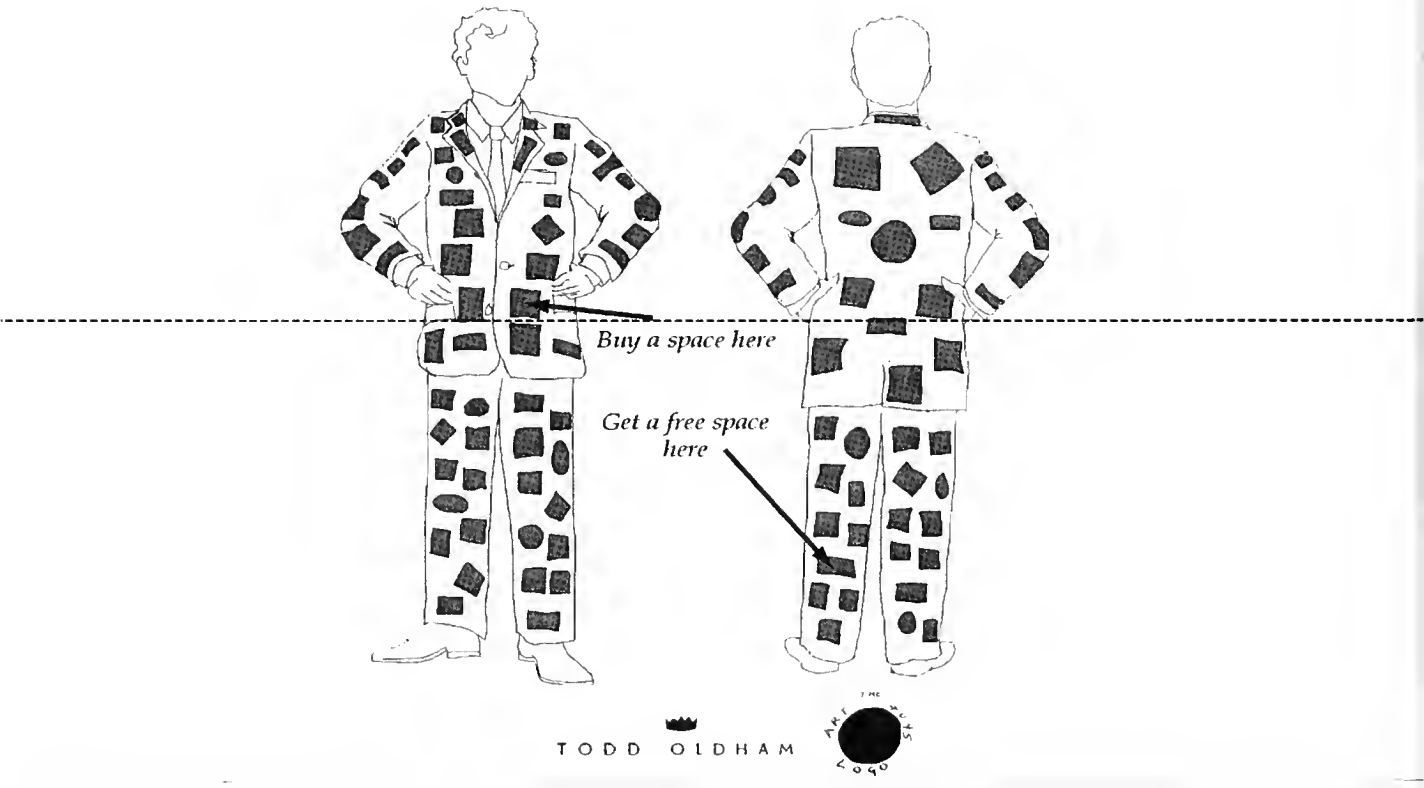
THE ART GUYS WITH TODD OLDHAM

Todd Oldham has accepted The Art Guys challenge to create this idea so unlikely in *haute couture.* Oldham's work typically appropriates from the consumer's everyday use of clothing more graciously than this. His thrift shop-gone-uptown motifs are tastefully—not-tastelessly—vernacularly inspired. Meanwhile, The Art Guys always-obvious vernacular appropriations illustrate an approach the *haute couture* of today simply does not practice.

And so by agreeing to the suits project, Oldham has taken the biggest step here, not The Art Guys. While Oldham is led farther from his successful signature style, The Art Guys are just being consistent, and remain centered on their METHODS. To their credit, The Art Guys have always maintained the courage not to cultivate a stylistic trademark appropriate to the way the art world "works".

Perhaps we have seen The Art Guys M.O. in architecture culture. At one time Frank Gehry appropriated the everyday use of materials by the consumer (for him, the tract home builder,) not the everyday uses of materials by the architectural elite. Didn't this, at one time, appear foolish? Then what is the significance of the calm acceptability of others (say, Frank Israel or Eric Owen Moss) practicing quite within that cleared out space of avant-garde acceptability?

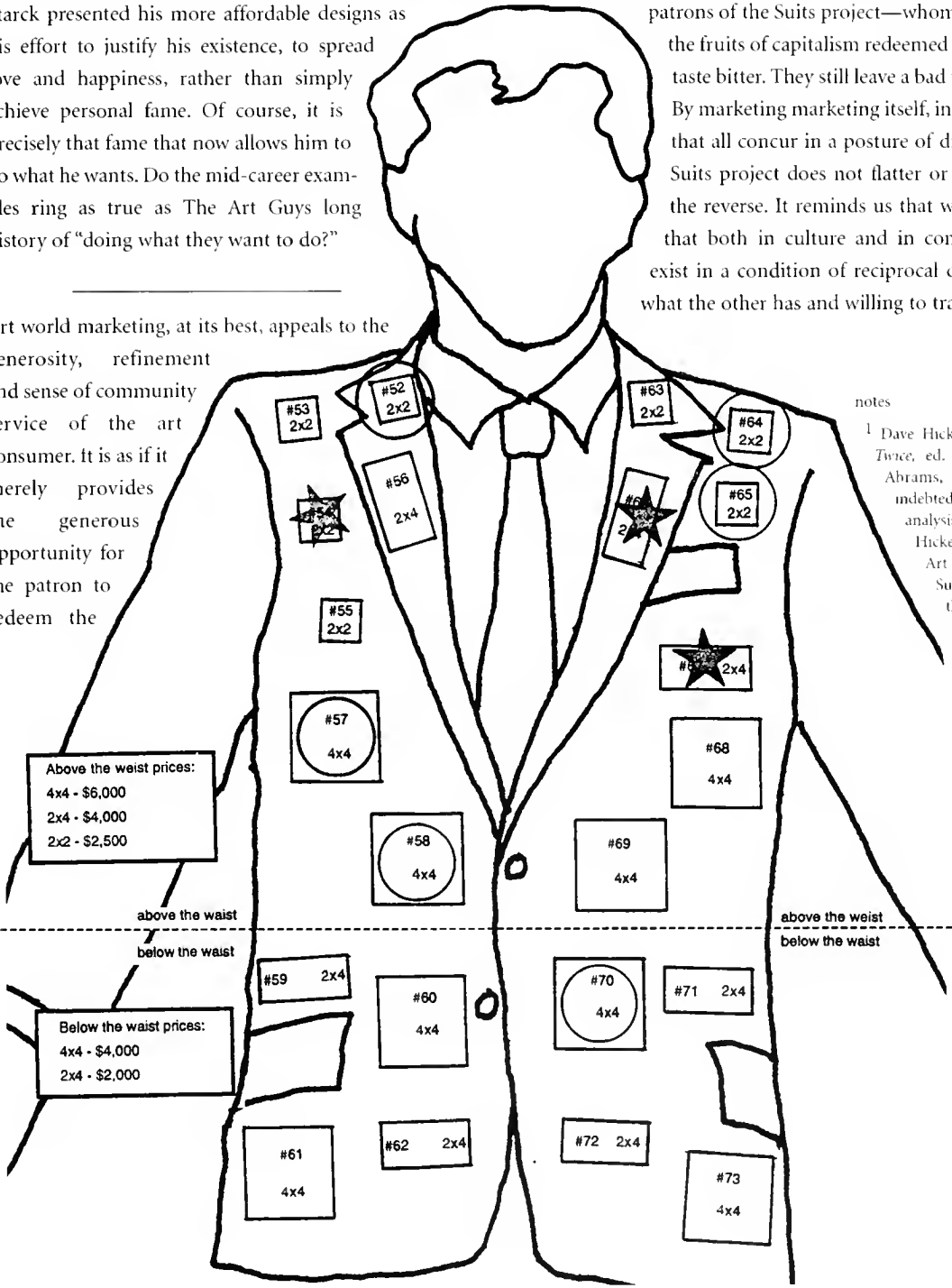
And what is the importance of the mid-career courageous act? The Oldham collaboration provides us with the opportunity to consider the successful designer who shifts, after already establishing his or her own branded success, to do something like The Art Guys do. That is, shifting to "do what they've always wanted to do," but weren't 'allowed.' Of this we have heard recently from Philippe Starck in a Harvard Excellence in Design Award acceptance speech at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. With the courage of his past success, he described himself as a Christmas Gift producer and referred to the beautiful works that have become his trademark as "bullshit". Now, in mid-career, he explained his desire to shift his attention from the making of the rare luxury object to the making of equally well-designed, but



THE ART GUYS WITH TODD OLDHAM

inexpensive, popular items, such as plastic lamps and chairs. Starck presented his more affordable designs as his effort to justify his existence, to spread love and happiness, rather than simply achieve personal fame. Of course, it is precisely that fame that now allows him to do what he wants. Do the mid-career examples ring as true as The Art Guys long history of "doing what they want to do?"

Art world marketing, at its best, appeals to the generosity, refinement and sense of community service of the art consumer. It is as if it merely provides the generous opportunity for the patron to redeem the bitter fruits of capitalism. But for us, and for the advertising patrons of the Suits project—whomever they may be—the fruits of capitalism redeemed in sponsoring it still taste bitter. They still leave a bad taste in our mouths. By marketing marketing itself, in high culture worlds that all concur in a posture of distaste for trade, the Suits project does not flatter or empower us. Quite the reverse. It reminds us that we are not complete; that both in culture and in commerce two parties exist in a condition of reciprocal desire, each wanting what the other has and willing to trade for it.[1]



notes

[1] Dave Hickey, *The Art Guys: Think Twice*, ed. Polly Koch (New York: Abrams, 1995), 15-16. We are indebted to Dave Hickey for the analysis in the last paragraph. Hickey was writing about The Art Guys work prior to the Suits project, but we find that he described precisely the matters that now coalesce in the Suits.

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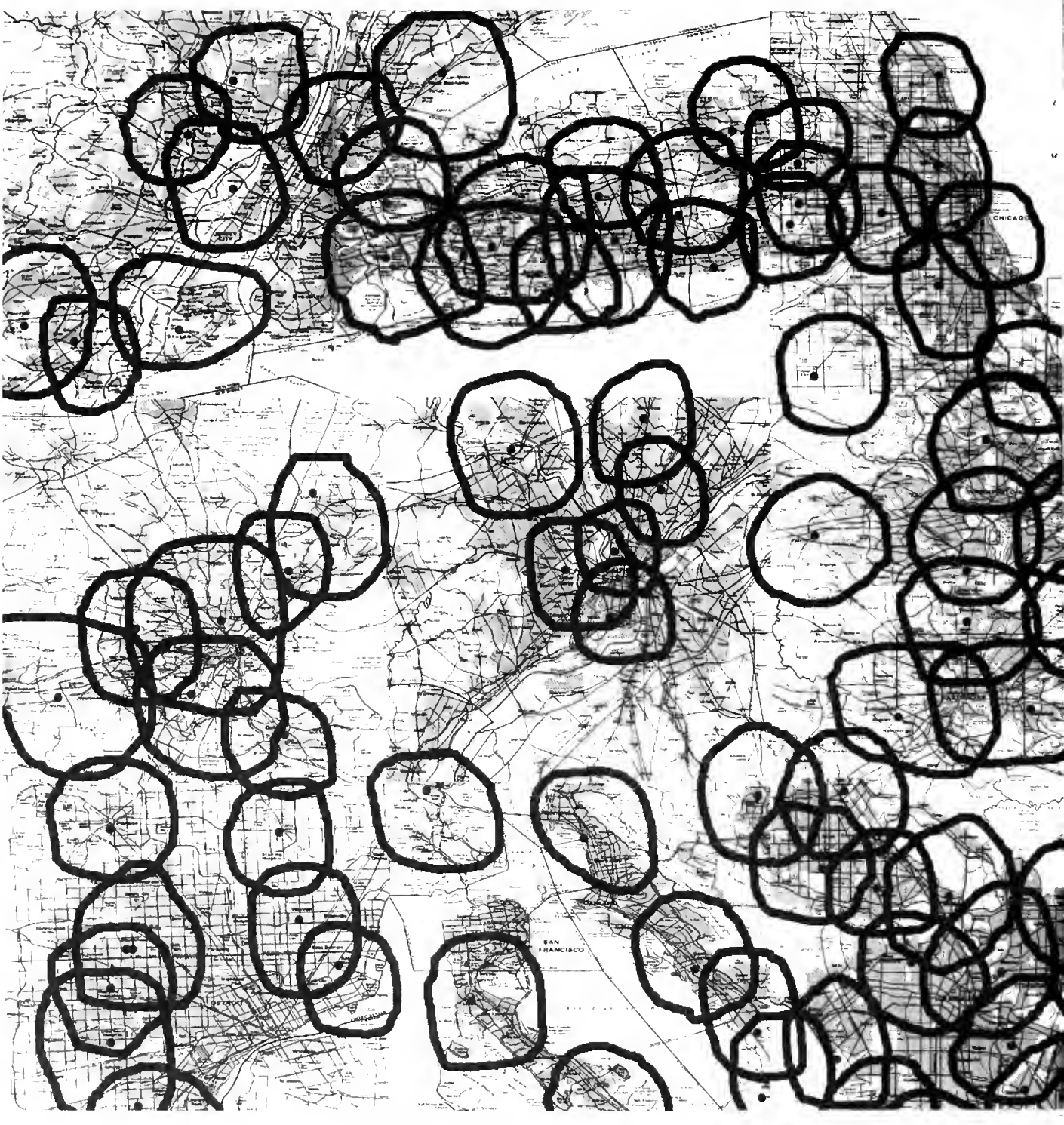

PETER LAURENCE SEE "PORTRAIT OF THE COMMODITY AS A YOUNG GIRL" SECTION C Corner Store

LAND IS NOT A CONSUMER GOOD

BY CAROL BURNS

In an economy geared ever more blatantly toward consumption, one basic commodity can be neither produced not reproduced: land.

American land use is based on the right of individual ownership. In a remarkable break with European manorial practices, American settlers faced land surplus rather than land shortage. The importance of freehold tenure as a means of land disposal cannot be overstated. It gave rise to the independent yeoman farmer who owned and occupied his own land. In the process of clearing it, building on it, and developing it, the settler developed traits of self-reliance and initiative. Central to his security and well-being was the land he owned, and attempts to dictate or limit its use were intolerable.

Development of cities, linked as always to the development of capitalism, provides a site of friction wherein the flows of advanced urban economics chafe and connect with the earth's surface.

The most serious dilemma is this: space can be conquered only through the production of space. The specific spaces of transport and communication, of human settlement and occupancy, all legitimized under some legal system of rights to spaces (of the body, of land, of home, etc.) which guarantees security of place and access to the members of society, form a fixed frame within which the dynamics of a social process must unfold. In the context of capital accumulation this fixity of spatial organization becomes heightened into an absolute contradiction. The effect is to unleash capitalism's powers of "creative destruction," upon the geographical landscape.

Given the degraded environment of the sprawling low-density peripheral American city , it can only be concluded that we are wasting the land.

It is the work of an economy that is wasteful from top to bottom - a symbiosis of unlimited greed at the top and a lazy, passive, and self-indulgent consumptiveness at the bottom. We are all involved in it. Environmental movements are not a creative response to the situation. The environmentalism of the highly industrialized countries are a sham, because they make it their business to fight against something that they do not really wish to destroy. We are a nation of fantasists. We believe, apparently, in the infinite availability of finite resources.

Carol Burns is an Associate Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and a partner with Taylor MacDougall Burns Architects

Charlie Cannon is a recent recipient of a Masters of Architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. His master's work was an examination of the post-suburban condition that he and his research partners described as "Panurbanism."

Gretchen Schneider is a recent recipient of a Masters of Architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Her master's work was an analysis and critique of new urban town planning.

CAROL BURNS

MAP OF SPRAWL

In the new American city, discrete traditional urban cores are surrounded by a continuous, low-slung, low density urban fabric. This map documents the thickening of the American metropolitan landscape. The **BLACK AREAS** (parts of the New York tri-state area) are population centers containing more than 10,000 people per square mile. The DARK GRAY AREAS (almost the entire interior of Florida) surrounding these centers represent counties in which more than 50% of the population live in urbanized areas. According to the Census Bureau, an urbanized area includes a population center ("a central place") and the immediately adjacent, densely settled "urban fringe." To qualify as an urbanized area, this conurbation must contain at least 50,000 people. The LIGHT GRAY AREAS (large portions of the state of Nevada) demarcate counties in which more than 50% of the population live in what the Census Bureau describes as "urban outside of urbanized areas." This is to say, places where the population is densely settled, but does not have access to a traditional urban center. This new urban agglomeration makes meaningful distinctions between town and country irrelevant if not impossible and forces the question: "Where does the city end?"

The Sprawl Map was developed by Charlie Cannon and Gretchen Schneider, with help from Arlene Olivero of the Harvard Map Collection using data from the 1990 Census.

STARS, SWATCHES, AND SWEETS

Thoughts on Post-Fordist Production and the Star System in Architecture

BY ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES

Architects tend to refer to themselves as visual people. Though we often employ this as an excuse for our poor writing skills, it also points out our fascination with visual information, our interest in making sense out of visual relationships and our love for making things that are understood largely in visual, as well as visceral, terms. Lately however—perhaps because I have been writing more than designing—I have been thinking about those aspects of our profession that are less visible, such as the economic conditions of production, and how they relate to that which is made highly visible, such as the Star System. I'm referring to the structure of contemporary architectural practice and the way in which its discourse elevates certain designers to the status of stars. The stars' works, published in magazines and monographs, are what Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital" in a global system. As status symbols, the buildings are valued for their ability to portray their patrons as world-class consumers. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or Richard Meier's Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona are prime examples of this. The Star System's high visibility aesthetics of consumption appears to be linked to the visual suppression of the conditions of production. This is particularly true today because of the way post-industrial technologies and post-fordist economic practices have widened the gap between production and consumption. Though this gap is most evident in items of mass production, from electronics to clothing, it may also explain why the Star System has emerged with such force in architecture in recent decades.

fordism

Post-fordist production can be most easily understood in relation to the fordist model of the assembly line which dominated American manufacturing from the 1920s to the 1970s. Dependent upon steady labor, it evolved into a dynamic, but relatively stable, unionized system where productivity increases were tied to wage increases which in turn increased consumer demand, further sustaining the system. Henry Ford is credited with recognizing that it was in his interest to pay his workers enough that they could afford to buy one of his cars. Rather than skimping on wages, he kept costs down with the economies of scale of the assembly line and routinized tasks. A pyramidal system of large central plants run by large corporations, it nonetheless recognized its dependence upon its producers also being consumers and paid relatively high wages to those at its base.[1] For the majority of the population, incomes rose and wealth was more equitably distributed than in any period before or after. The physical work involved with making things was not only respected, it was honored as "The American Way" and the sure route to joining the middle class and its consumer lifestyle.

The realms of consumption and production were also integrated in the product itself. The assembly line was geared to turning out mass quantities of the same product, an *objet type*. Model Ts were only made in black. Their exposed frame and joints were designed to ease the process of assembly so as to further reduce their cost and make them more affordable to more consumers. It isn't until the industry had expanded to multiple plants that more models became available, and car bodies designed to appeal to different consumer groups were placed over the frame. This gradual separation of the exterior package from the internal performance of the engine and frame, a separation that can be considered in terms of a distinction between the realms of the consumer and the producer, now allows individual consumers to design their own option packages of finishes and accessories. This flexibility and ability to customize the product is one of the key aspects of post-fordist production.

post-fordism

By the 1970s the rigidities of the fordist model proved increasingly cumbersome and detrimental in the face of the saturation of consumer demand at home, stagflation, and increased competition from the recovered economies of Japan

ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES

and Germany. [2] As a result, manufacturers began to adopt the more flexible strategies of post-fordist production methods. Computers and telecommunications allowed capital to become more flexible and mobile. Instead of high volume production, manufacturers began to concentrate on offering higher value–more customizable options, more attention to consumer differentiation. Instead of the less stratified, one-model-fits-all approach of fordism, post-fordism distinguished deluxe models from base models, allowing for greater class distinctions, or what in advertising circles is referred to as market segmentation. This was enabled by the growth in information technologies and their application towards more sophisticated market research and automated production.

Today, robotics and retoolable machinery are able to produce small batches of differentiated products for different segments of the market, (while also allowing manufacturers to rely less on unionized labor and suffer less the demand for wage increases in the face of inflation without productivity gains.) The ability of Advertising to create consumer desire for products independent of their performance plays a larger role in industry. Increasingly, the role of the designer is directed towards exciting the consumer, less regard is given to the performance or means of construction/production of the object. The strategy of Swatch watch design - various surface designs laid over the same, inexpensive functional core components - exemplifies the role and position in production of the designer in post-fordist production.[3] This role is not to enhance any functionality of the watch: it is to enhance sales. By producing various, distinctive watches, these designers allow consumers to distinguish themselves through their individual selections.

Swatch watch design is analogous to architecture at a variety of levels. Option packages on finishes in new condominiums or houses in subdivisions come to mind. First, buyers are allowed to customize the home through selecting vinyl siding versus brick veneer, or laminate versus wood kitchen cabinet doors. In these examples, the architecture is assumed to be the unchanging template, while the surface style is a changeable commodity selected by the consumer. In large commercial buildings, the same model holds, only the architect takes the place of the consumer in designing the surfaces. Referring to how formulaic the unchanging template has become, Robert Gutman quotes a large Texas developer saying, "We've done so many large office buildings, we're able to make 90% of the decisions before the architect draws a line."[4] More like the Swatch or car-designer, the architect is increasingly seen as the designer of the package alone, the surfaces designed to appeal to consumers' emotions and desires. The moment of invention occurs in the representational or associational imagery, the dressing applied over a conventional construction.

postmodernism as niche marketing

Postmodern architecture's focus on decorated sheds, symbolic surfaces, and referential meaning participates in exactly this kind of attention to the packaging. Architect

Stephen Kieran has described postmodernism's varied signature styles in terms of niche marketing.[5] From a marketer's perspective, the designs of Morphosis, Richard Meier, or Robert Stern can easily be respectively matched to their appeal within particular consumer "lifestyle clusters" of *Bohemian Mix, Furs and Station Wagons,* or *Blueblood Estates.*[6] By the same logic, the design movements of the past thirty years, (structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructivism, neo-rationalism, neo-historicism, critical regionalism, etc.) can be seen as a collective effort by the profession to provide consumers with the level of product choice consistent with the expectations of post-fordist production.

This is counter to the movements' original intentions. Postmodernism's emphasis on theory and cultural criticism was intended to orient the profession away from the mainstream consumerism that had come to dominate it in the fifties and sixties,[7] towards a more intellectual basis for form-making. The formalism of Colin Rowe, the populism of Venturi and Scott Brown, followed by structuralism, and later post-structuralism operated as uncontaminated domains in which architects advanced the discipline independent of either the realms of consumption or production. By focusing on form as the vehicle for meaning Venturi and Scott Brown's decorated sheds, Rossi's typological transformations, and Eisenman's deconstructions all maintain critical distance from the social and economic conditions of society itself. Issues of production and use are seen as largely irrelevant to the meaning of the building. They are dismissed as circumstantial, as outside the essence of architecture. The result is that both deconstructivism and postmodern historicism have become styles that hardly challenge the social systems within which they operate. The various 'isms' of postmodernism have tried to redesign and redefine architecture independent of trying to reform society or social experience. Whether conventionally expressed or not, social hierarchies and the modes of production are accepted as givens, outside the concern (or control) of the architect.[8]

The focus on theory, like the focus on form, has distanced design from the concerns of production. Like Swatches or different car bodies, the various postmodernisms have focused the role of the designer solely on the visible meanings conveyed by the package.

the star system

The Star System embodies the changed role of the designer under post-fordism and within post-modernism. Rather than being called upon to integrate expression and construction, art and industry, or the realms of consumption and production, the designer is increasingly focused solely on eliciting consumer desire. The media—magazines, monographs, museum exhibitions, even television talk shows—feed and construct consumer desire through their promotion of ever new images, which it is the Star designer's role to provide. This dissemination of images and discourse about design serves the cultural elite's need to distinguish themselves from the masses. If the mass produced *objet type* served a growing middle class, the proliferation of design choices under post-fordism serve a more differentiated social structure—especially with the

media's association of products with different market segments and ranking of their desirability. The Star designers tend to serve the most elite class and its institutions.[9] Beyond providing rationally based buildings, the Star designers provide the emotionally based images of symbolic capital. This capital is as international as the media through which it is conveyed.

the globalization of consumption

Renowned business consultant Kenichi Ohmae has studied global consumption patterns and observes that once a developing country's per capita income rises above $5000 US, its consumers' taste preferences converge and become more like those of the US.[10] The globalization of consumption patterns is most apparent at the upper end of the income scale where Rolexs, Rolls Royces and, increasingly, Star Architects are internationally recognized. A consequence of this is that architecture, like a watch or a car, becomes a commodity, a mobile status symbol, autonomous from the society and place in which it is built. Aldo Rossi, known for his interest in vernacular types and a place-based architecture, decried the fact that when hired to build a hotel in Japan the client did not want it to reflect Japanese collective memory. He wanted a "signature" (i.e.. Italian) Rossi building.[11] Jean Nouvel has commented on a similar phenomenon within France. Since the construction of Mitterand's *Grand Projects*, Nouvel claims that the mayors of all the other French cities now informally compete with one another to get their own buildings by the same architects.[12] The point is not about asking talented designers to work with and express qualities about the particular people and place. It is about producing a recognizable name-brand product that identifies the patrons–often the city itself—as members of an elite. The designer's role becomes that of making the city into a consumer of architecture.

the globalization of production

The mobility of Star architects to work in various corners of the globe is only possible given the mobility of capital and information in the post-fordist, post-industrial economy. Robert Reich, former secretary of labor under Clinton, has described the global nature of contemporary production at length. He writes: "Consider some examples: Precision ice hockey equipment is designed in Sweden, financed in Canada, and assembled in Cleveland and Denmark for distribution in North America and Europe respectively, out of alloys whose molecular structure was researched and patented in Delaware and fabricated in Japan."[13]

Traditionally constructed out of materials at hand, buildings today are not so different from Reich's hockey skates. Sweets Catalog places a vast array of prefabricated components at the architects hand even if these components need to be shipped from across the country to the building site. On particularly large or complex projects, architects search out materials and labor worldwide. Renzo Piano's Kansai

Airport is so large that the demand for electricians and welders during construction far surpassed local, even regional supply. At the peak of construction, 10,000 laborers speaking 30 different languages were working on site.[14] At the same time, the contract for the pre-fabricated steel components was sourced to various international suppliers so as to pull on multiple steel stocks rather than risk depleting a single supplier before completion. A different but related example is the CADD-CAM (Computer Aided Drafting and Design—Computer Aided Manufacturing) process employed by Frank Gehry's office. Using software produced for the automobile and aerospace industries, Gehry's office uses a triple axle camera to generate digital models from wood and chipboard models with complex curves and unclassifiable geometries. The information from the digital model can be fed more or less directly to triple-axle milling, cutting, and bending machines to produce the extremely customized pieces making up Gehry's sculptural surfaces. However, the machines capable of handling such information on pieces the size of building materials, are globally dispersed. Jim Glymph from Gehry's office describes the bidding process in global terms: they tend to have the stone cut in France, the metal bent in Kansas, the steel milled in Japan, etc., etc.[15] Both Gehry's and Piano's buildings are being produced more and more like cars or hockey skates. The global resources that are marshaled together could be distributed anywhere. In terms of production, such architecture is a mobile commodity.

spatial separation of producers from consumers

In architecture, the post-fordist separation of the realm of consumption from the realm of production is most visible in the Star System. But even more significant, although far less visible, is the spatial separation of producers from consumers that has accompanied the widening income gap between them. While the richest fifth of the world's population had 30 times the wealth of the poorest fifth in 1960, by 1989 they controlled 59 times more wealth.[16] This is the same time period of the ascendancy of post-fordism, the weakening of unions, the increasing mobility of capital, and the outsourcing of labor. Instead of Henry Ford's commitment to pay his producers enough to also be his consumers, post-fordism relies on cheap labor, often in developing countries, and then sells its goods to consumers back in the developed economies. Post-fordism's competitiveness relies on uneven development and the spatial separation and distinction of producers from consumers. The Star System's almost exclusive engagement with elite consumers reinforces the invisibility of labor and production.

In the developed countries, this is augmented by the way the service economy has redefined the nature of work. Manual labor or the making of tangible things has been devalued relative to working with numbers or information. Reich divides jobs into three categories: symbolic analysts, in-person services, and routine producers. While the salaries of

symbolic analysts have soared, the other two have fallen since the 1960s.[17] Production and labor are increasingly invisible. Digital processes appear effortless and have generated discussion of the end of work. Manufacturing has moved out of the cities, and in many cases, out of the G7 countries. Our cities and public spaces are dominated solely by the spaces of consumption.[18] While we are increasingly surrounded by elaborate Niketowns and banal strip malls, we get little reference to the third world sweatshops on which both depend for much of their production. The global decentralization of the economy is mirrored in the exurban decentralization of sprawl where gated communities and wealthy enclaves further separate the rich from the poor, making each invisible to the other.

For all of its globalization, post-fordism has in fact produced a world of widened gaps and separations-between rich and poor, consumers and producers, the visible and the invisible. That the Star System tends to exacerbate these gaps raises the questions about architecture's relationship to society and ideals of social progress. Perhaps this is why architecture—like so much of contemporary culture—has stars but seems to lack leaders. Role-models are in short supply. Postmodern culture has grown cynical of utopian efforts to reform or lead society. Instead, architectural discourse and the Star System have focused on reforming architecture itself, mostly by retooling the package. What if architecture focused instead on making visible that which has become invisible? Imagine where that might lead.

notes

[1]In 1997 the average hourly wage, including a significant benefits package for a low-skilled worker, at General Motors was $44. For long the largest private employer in the US, General Motors was just surpassed by Wal-Mart whose average hourly wage, including benefits is $10. Rebecca Blumenstein, Louise Lee, "The Changing Lot of the Hourly Worker", *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 1997, p.B1.

[2]By 1970 demand in US markets was largely satiated: 90% of households had a television, a refrigerator and a washing machine. By 1975, half of all Americans - as opposed to one quarter in 1950 - owned a car. Michael Piore, Charles Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 184-87.

[3]Unlike other post-fordist products Swatches are all similarly priced and do not ,in and of themselves, exacerbate class distinctions with luxury versus base models. However, according to Swatch President and CEO Nicolas Hayek, much of the company's success has to do with its deliberate positioning of itself as a relatively low-priced Swiss watch, in the company of Rolex, Piaget, etc.

[4]Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice, A Critical View*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 54.

[5]Stephen Kieran, "The Architecture of Plenty, Theory and Design in the Marketing Age", *The Harvard Architecture Review* , vol. VI, "Patronage", (New York: Rizzoli, 1987).

[6]*Bohemian Mix, Furs and Station Wagons, and Blueblood Estates* are among the 40 Lifestyle Clusters of used to distinguish market segments in Michael J. Weiss, *The Clustering of America*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

[7]The mainstreaming of modern architecture to the American middle class through How-To books and manufacturers brochures is discussed in Mark Jarzombek, "Good Life Modernism and Beyond" in *Cornell Journal of Architecture*, vol.4 (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1977), 76-93.

[8]This is especially true of much of the recent French architecture presented in this fall's lecture series at MIT. The competition system encourages young architects to challenge formal conventions, but not the programmatic or social dictates of the brief. The results can be a very empty formalism.

[9]Weld Coxe, author of several books and articles on the marketing of architectural services, describes the profession in terms of three types of firms. He recognizes the role of the Star System in his first category: strong-idea firms. Then come : strong-service firms, (the corporate firms and standard AIA practitioners) and strong-delivery firms, (those doing formulaic work, on-time, on-budget, no leaks.) The research was conducted with David Maister and is reported in Coxe, et. al. "Charting Your Course", in *Architectural Technology*, May/June 1986, 53.

[10]Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State, the Rise of Regional Economies*, (New York: Free Press, 1995).

[11]Conversation with the author, April, 1992.

[12]Lecture by Jean Nouvel, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1994.

[13]Reich, *The Work of Nations, Preparing Ourselves for 21st - Century Capitalism* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1992), 112.

[14]Lecture by Renzo Piano, MIT, Department of Architecture, October 28, 1997.

[15] An exception to this process is Gehry's "Fred and Ginger" office building in Prague. Local labor was so cheap that the local bid to hand cut the stone and construct the formwork beat out the automated machines. Lecture by Jim Glymph, MIT, Department of Architecture, April, 1997.

[16]Ingomar Hauchler, Paul M. Kennedy, eds., *Global Trends, The World Almanac of Development and Peace* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 53.

[17]Reich, ibid.

[18]Retail floor space in the US grew 80% in the 1980s! "Reinventing the Regional Mall," in *Urban Land*, February 1994, as referenced in Constance E. Beaumont, *How Superstore Sprawl Can Harm Communities* (Washington DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1994), 3.

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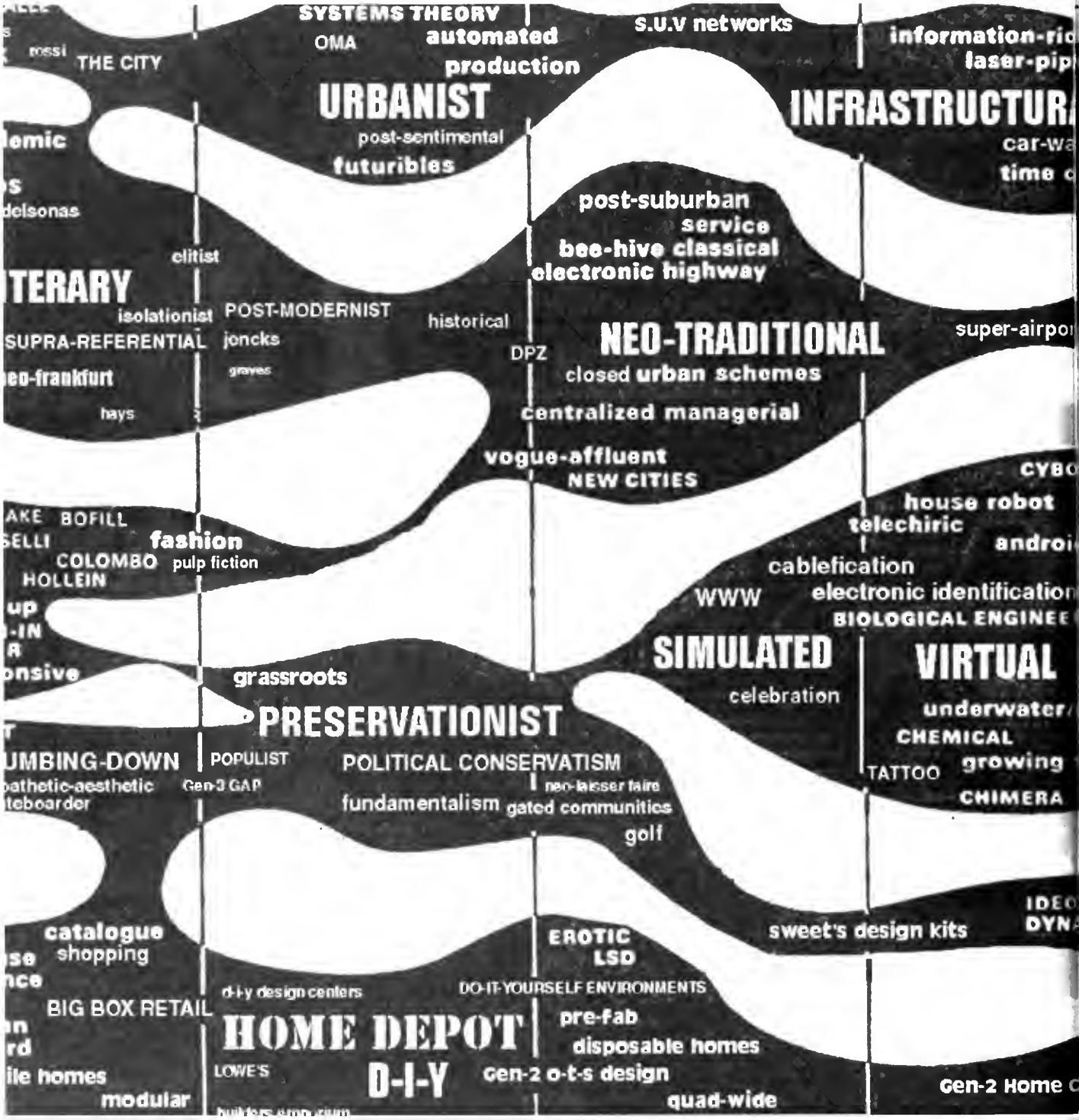
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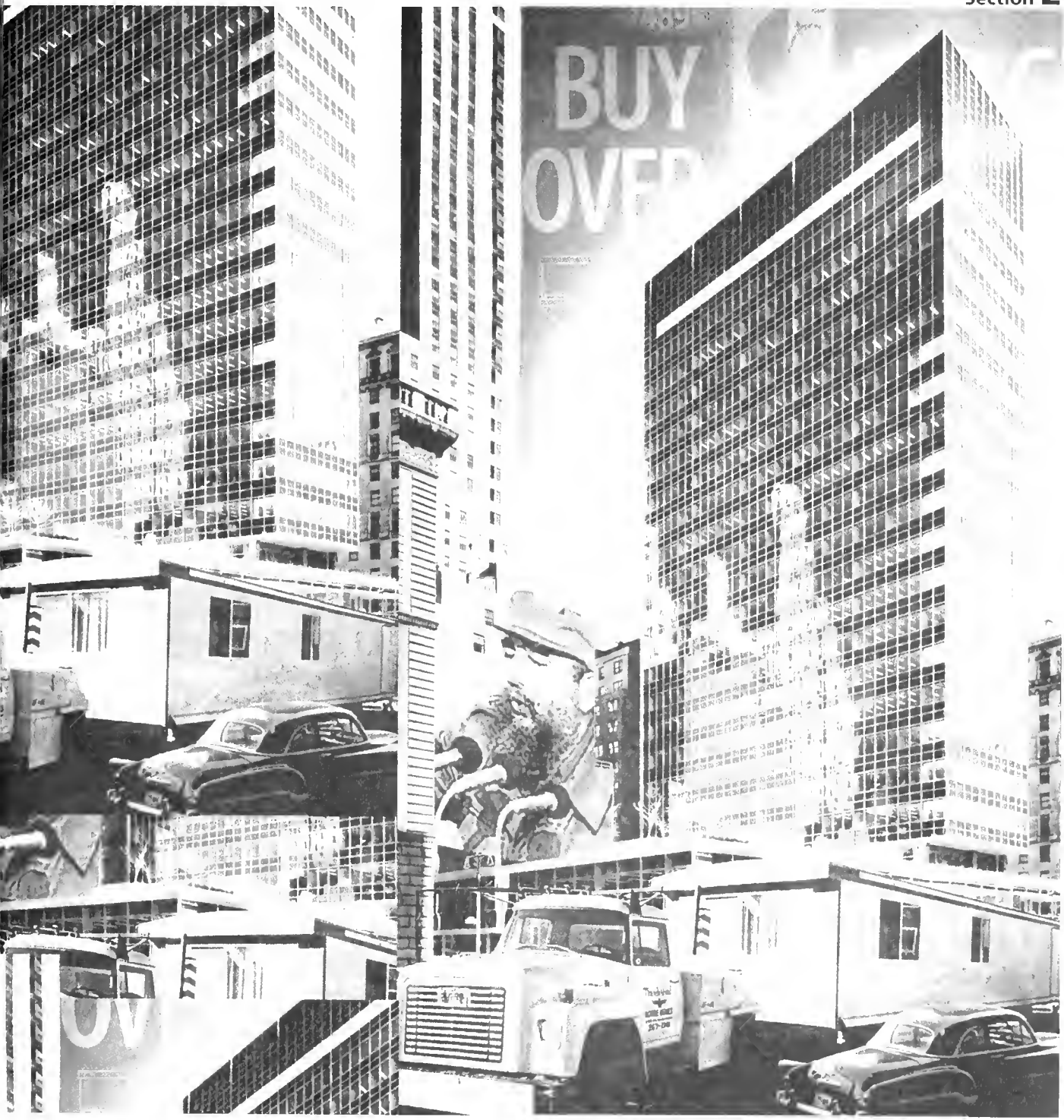
Using the Commodity



THE CARESS OF THE COMMODITY

On Autonomy, Compromise, and Other Possible Positions in Architecture

BY KAZYS VARNELIS

> Big architects are often progressive intellectuals; even those regarded as more conservative always manage to cultivate some fad or snobbism that sets them apart. In general, they are better dressed than artists, travel a great deal and are always calling each other on the phone. When they are not talking about the financial problems which eternally afflict them or about work, they know how to have a good time and are open to adventure. They can be recognized by a special quality in their gaze, conveying an amused, cynical detachment, and by the sly smile of those who possess secret information.
> - Barbara Radice, 1987[1]

After rejecting both modernism and postmodernism as explanatory models, architects have become reluctant to commit to any particular relation to culture. Instead, the architectural neo-avant-garde ignores broader questions of culture in order to seek out ways of producing autonomous form using methods derived from extra-architectural systems. The pages of *Any* magazine and *A.D.* parade the new programs for generating form: the fold, new biology, repetition, fractal geometry, the formless, and so on.

The neo-avant-garde's turn toward formal autonomy has been driven by its attempt to escape commodity culture, a retreat that I propose is misguided. Now, I do not intend to attack the neo-avant-garde for focusing their concern on form. Indeed a theoretical deconstruction of the opposition between commodity culture and autonomous work on form is unnecessary as that deconstruction has already been performed by the operations of capital itself. Rather, I intend to examine the consequences of the relationship between the neo-avant-garde and commodity culture in order to mark out possible future strategies for architecture.

The contemporary architectural neo-avant-garde continues playing out the postwar turn to autonomy that architects used to salvage the discipline from diagrammatic functionalism's retreat from aesthetics. By the 1950s, the profession's interest in an automatic generation of buildings out of functional diagrams and structural considerations had put architects in a deeply uncertain position. With its claim to scientific certainty, modernism opened its territory to new encroachments by engineering and the sciences. Compounding this was the assault on architecture by counter-culture forces on the Left accusing it of complicity in the capital-driven over-rationalization of everyday life.

Amidst this unremitting questioning of the discipline's proper scope, the possibilities of a pop architecture - be they from Archigram or Venturi, Rauch, Scott Brown - also threatened architecture's role as a high art. By drawing on the fabulously rich language of commodity culture - itself recently driven into hyperactivity by a tremendous intlux of modernist design strategies - pop architects energized their architectural production but simultaneously called into question the superiority of high art to popular culture. If pop culture was no longer trash to be rejected, but rather a source to draw on and operate within, then precisely how was architecture to be above it?

Architects reacted to these developments by turning inward to the autonomous conditions of architectural form. In this country, the New York Five led the charge back to the discipline, redefining architecture as an autonomous art concerned with a Greenbergian exploration of its conditions. Sophisticated manipulations of form and space increasingly took precedence over non-aesthetic considerations as educators trained at Cooper Union and Cornell spread the doctrine of autonomy to the architectural masses.

Today's neo-avant-garde is a product of this turn to autonomy. Having been converted to the promise of autonomy and having seen the demise of postmodernism first-hand, the neo-avant-garde has steadily moved toward more and more arcane means for generating architectural form, as if through alchemy, from abstract extra-architectural systems. In doing so, the neo-avant-garde strives towards an ideal of architecture as mathematics: perfectly formed, generated without the intervention of the human hand, and seemingly outside of history or culture.

Yet paradoxically, the neo-avant-garde's turn to autonomy and rejection of commodity implicates it in commodity culture, for the neo-avant-garde is nothing so much as a form of *haute couture*.

As Val Warke has explained in his discussion of the fashion system in architecture, the neo-avant-garde, like fashion's *haute couture*, is intrinsically anti-populist. Through extreme statements, the neo-avant-garde and *haute couture* serve to attract attention to the discipline and to point out new directions for a small audience of fashion-hungry consumers and producers. In this, critiques of the solutions of the neo-avant-garde as having little to do with everyday life are off the mark. To say Peter Eisenman's work is overly obscurantist and therefore not appropriate for a larger public would be as apt as saying that the late Gianni Versace's runway designs were too extreme for the average person to wear. Surely, that much is obvious, but *haute couture* is not meant for the masses.[2]

Coca Cola Bottling Plant Plant, Los Angeles, 1936-7. An encounter between architecture culture and commerce.

In architecture, the most receptive audience for radical fashions—architecture students, failed architects, and wannabe-architects—forms a definite demographic niche, however small and economically meager. This demographic is then targeted by fashion-heavy books, periodicals, architect-designed accessories, accessories for architects, and even architecture schools themselves.[3] For this crucial demographic, whose members frequently consume more than they produce, architecture is not so much a career as a life-style to consume. This can be seen most clearly at the very pinnacle of architectural *haute couture* where unpaid or scandalously underpaid internships are widespread and labor becomes a form of consumption in itself. Architecture is no longer simply a matter of producing buildings, it is now increasingly a lifestyle choice.

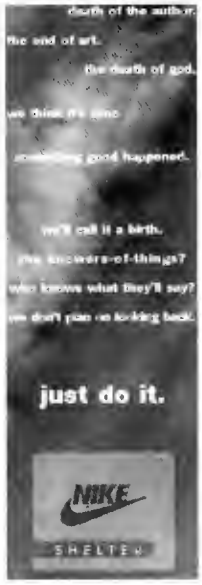
The most dramatic manifestation of architecture as lifestyle is at the mall chain *Structure*, targeted at the attractive demographic niche of men in their twenties. At *Structure*, architectural lifestyle is reduced to pure image and marketing tactic. Quotes from the masters—Mies, Corb, and Wright—are etched in metal panels on the walls, establishing a sense of solidity and permanence, while the latest books from architecture's *haute couture* adorn coffee tables, underscoring the firm's fashion sense.

But underneath both the architecturally branded lifestyle of *Structure* and the neo-avant-garde lies an empty promise: there is no room in the world of *haute couture* for more designers. The number of neo-avant-garde architects is limited by the market's capacity to absorb their production. Very few students—at most a few dozen of the entire number of architecture graduates each year—will ever hold positions where they will be able to practice an autonomous pursuit of form. The rest will work for large & small firms of varying quality, developers, large corporations, or will leave the field entirely. Just as Debord argues that the only thing keeping the spectacle in play is the promise of fulfillment held by the next product, so only the possibility that the next fashion will bring true architectural-ness, serves to keep the charade in play.[4]

KAZYS VARNELIS

Although such a comparison would no doubt cause anguish to both parties, the drive for autonomy of the neo-avant-garde finds a kindred spirit in the research program of graduate programs in architectural history and theory. In the ivory tower of academe, autonomy of discipline is valorized under the banner of "pure" research and a safe distance from the market. As Cary Nelson has pointed out in his *Manifesto of Tenured Radical*, although the academy is often dominated by a theoretically oriented Left, it has increasingly marketed a lifestyle of noble research, encouraging graduate students to buy into the myth of an autonomous, idyllic academic lifestyle. Universities and faculty in such programs benefit greatly from using graduate students as relatively inexpensive labor for teaching introductory courses and derive personal satisfaction to have more educated students to talk to.[5]

Chip Minnick



Rather than going on advocating the commodity-free purity of the neo-avant-garde or alternatively trashing it as obscurantist from a safe position in the supposedly unsullied academy, we should admit that, in today's culture, there is no position free from commodity culture. I do not mean to argue for the elimination of either work on form or pure historical or theoretical research—both have their places in legitimizing architecture as a discipline—but to argue for a new honesty about the role of capital in architecture.

Architecture is the most heavily capitalized of the arts and we simply cannot continue to imagine that commodity culture will go away if we ignore it. We cannot escape into autonomous realms of pleasure, be they work on form or critical theory and expect that our position is outside of commodity culture. Doing so is simply uncritical and irresponsible.

WE MUST REALIZE THAT THE MOST URGENT TASK FOR BOTH ARCHITECT AND CRITIC IN THE FIRST YEARS OF THE NEXT MILLENNIUM WILL BE DEVISING NEW STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH, RATHER THAN IGNORING, COMMODITY CULTURE. Rather than taking up uncompromising positions, such strategies will contain different degrees

The NIKE SHELTER project is intended to question both architecture and commodity culture by bringing them into uncomfortably close quarters. I begin with a fictional scenario: inspired by Disney's success with its housing development in Celebration, Florida, Nike decides to expand its lifestyle-oriented marketing and pitch the housing sector. Creating a corporate division called Nike Shelter, Nike promises to improve housing by delivering high performance and extreme styling. The housing developments expand Nike's presence in the city, provide income through rent and tax credits, and ultimately allow Nike to more deeply saturate consumer culture with its image.

"No Critical Distance" is the key to understanding this project. For the housing consumer, it suggests that Nike Shelter can envision no limits or encounter no distances that it can't span. For the consumer in architecture culture, it challenges the alibi of maintaining a critical distance to avoid difficult questions about the relationship between architecture and commodity culture.

While William S. Burroughs has been criticized for selling out by making a Nike TV commercial, it could be said that Burroughs' seeming lack of critical distance allowed him to use Nike to his own ends. Perhaps seeing Burroughs on TV could inspire someone to check out his writing or alternately, if they knew who Burroughs was, to reflect on the absurdity of his taking Nike for a ride. My position is on one hand to help Nike make money in this fictional scenario by providing an architectural solution. On the other hand,

of accommodation and resistance. In his essay "The Author as Producer," Benjamin pointed out that the wrong question was being asked of progressive art: "Rather than ask, 'What is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time?' I should like to ask 'What is its *position* within them?'"[6] Some sixty years later, we would do well to finally follow Benjamin's lead and realize that hoping to escape the commodity through autonomy is not politically progressive *per se*. Genuinely political art can only come from an awareness of one's situation *within* capitalism. A new understanding of architecture's place within commodity culture—its relation to industry, to labor, to commercial imagery — is needed.

Chip Minnick

A variety of different strategies for understanding the relationship between architecture and capital could inform new or renewed approaches to the field. Some architects might take up positions that frankly acknowledge the complicity of architecture in commodity culture and even celebrate that connection. While perhaps critical theorists might find such a position offensive to their refined tastes, the public might think differently. Some of the richest moments in American architecture during the twentieth century—the Streamline and Deco periods, the Skyscraper Moderne, the googie architecture of the 1950s–are defined by an encounter between commercial culture and architecture culture. We might even think back to a time when a formally sophisticated architectural *haute couture* sought to create an iconography for the corporate realm. What was Lever House, in its squeaky, green cleanness, if not a giant advertisement for soap? What was Seagram's if not a monumental, abstract but boozy bottle of Seagram's? While I don't want to advocate an uncritical romance with capitalism, acknowledging, rather than avoiding commodity culture would at the very least foreground questions of political economy instead of pretending that they don't exist. And although it is easy to condemn these projects as complicit with capitalism, they are also important to us as symbols of a particular phase of capital. The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit is as unimaginable outside of

this kind of corporate alliance could provide much-needed mixed-class housing in the city. As this thesis develops, I intend to explore the possibilities for inhabiting the corporate structure in new ways rather than take up a utopian strategy from some critical distance outside it. Inhabiting, after all, is a way of reshaping existing space to make your own.

- Chip Minnick SCI-Arc M.Arch Thesis Fall 1997
Advisor: Neil Denari Reader: Kazys Varnelis

KAZYS VARNELIS

the 1950s modernist city as Lorenzo de Medici would be outside Renaissance Florence.

Neither should an architecture of *haute couture* be rejected out of hand. Obscure works for the architectural elite are part of the discipline's inner mythology. Wishing that the elite will go away will do no good. Instead, a more frank awareness of the neo-avant-garde's audience and role might make its existence both more honest and more productive for the field.

More critical relationships to the field can only be the result of carefully positioned, local strategies. Now that culture is more completely permeated by the commodity than it ever has been before, it may be possible to work from within to undermine capital by riddling it with contradictions, no matter how temporary. While certainly, capitalism has a remarkable capacity for recuperating resistant moves, it is merely a human construct, not an eternal edifice. Might it be possible that while capital continues its relentless hegemonization, that the equally relentless resistance to capital—humbled perhaps, but not stopped—will eventually wear it down, or even destroy it from within?

Such strategies are naturally far more dangerous than the safe old world of autonomy, but also possibly more effective. Architects will have to learn to act stealthily, with disingenuity, cognizant of their voice and the audiences they address. Rather than immediately drifting to one pole or another, architects will need to use *both* the most sophisticated work on form *and* the most carefully thought out strategies within specific social situations. The result may be that architects are finally drawn to understand and

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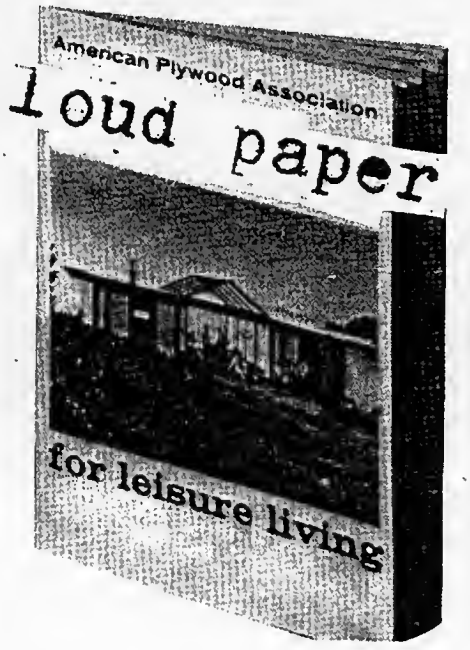
Mimi Zeiger



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"to eliminate the antithesis between producer and recipient." Substituting anarchy for avant-garde, the zine community is a part of the D I Y. (Do-It-Yourself) movement. It takes the publication of ideas out of the hands of capital. One of the major ethics of zinesters is that anyone can create and distribute a zine. Factsheet Five provides instruction booklets via mail or online giving all the necessary tips for self publishing.

Pamphlets, manifestoes and comics are not unusual means of architectural communication. Both the ideas and artifacts of groups such as the Futurists, the Situationist Internationale, or Archigram have impact on today's language of architecture. 'loud paper' follows in a long line of architects writing loud. The main audience of 'loud paper' is composed of students of architecture and young architects. These two groups are the most disenchanted with standard architectural practice and are looking for other routes of expression. The application of zine culture to architectural communication allows for a larger band width of voices to be heard within the discipline.

'loud paper' is a zine dedicated to increasing the volume of architectural discourse. It originates in my frustration with the stagnation of ordinary forms of architectural dialogue. It challenges the failed systems of trade magazines which solely publish big gun architects and academic journals which maintain the elitism of an overly intellectual language, as well as the same cast of theoretical characters. A louder, faster system must be implemented. Unhampered by the confines of

KAZYS VARNELIS

comment upon the nature of the institutions they work for as artists did in the post-conceptual period.

These three works-in-progress, all graduate theses at SCI-Arc, are offered here not so much to demonstrate a common program, and certainly should not be taken as a hint of a schoolwide direction, but rather as evidence of a rising interest in developing more effective strategies for architects in commodity culture and as examples of the possible diversity of such strategies.

notes

[1] Barbara Radice, *Jewelry by Architects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 7.

[2] Val Warke, "'In' Architecture: Observing the Mechanisms of Fashion," in *Architecture : In Fashion*, ed. Deborah Fausch, Paulette Singley, Rodolphe El-Khoury, and Zvi Eprat (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 124-147. These ideas are reinforced in Magali Sarfatti Larson, *Behind The Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 6-12.

[3] On the explosion of "architecture culture," see Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (New York: Princeton, 1988), 92.

[4] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 45.

[5] Cary Nelson, *Manifesto of A Tenured Radical* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

[6] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 222.

a cammercial or intellectual market, zines represent the straight up passions and energies of their creative cammunity and writers The "community" created via netwarking zinesters trading letters, zines, etc., flies in the face of the Habermasian model af a public sphere based on rational discaurse. This nan-space caunterpublic realm is shaped by cantestation, self interest and the private realm seeping into the public arena. Rather than the civil deliberations tawards a "camman goad," promoted by Habermas and the newsletters af the A.I.A., the zine cammunity agrees to argue for difference.

- Mimi Zeiger SCI-Arc M.Arch Thesis Fall 1997 Advisar: Jahn Chase, Reader: Margaret Crawfard

Kazys Varnelis is a Professor in the History - Theory Department at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Los Angeles.

Michael Pinta

disputes over shaes have been knawn to spark violence amang teenagers

The Paradox of Adalescence: Building in the Counterpublic Sphere.

Teenagers tend ta reject that which is pravided far them in favor af appropriating things far themselves; strategies need to address the urban teenage caunterpublics in arder ta create a suitable architectural institution devoted to teenagers in trouble. My strategy is threefald:

Stealth Architecture: an architecture that can convey multiple meanings thraugh its appearance ar perform multiple functions and accammodate programmatic overlapping; the architecture is 'two-faced,' avercoming teens' tendencies ta reject the voice af authority

(In) Visibility: the teenage obsessian with image is a given; adalescence is a time when outward appearance is af utmost impartance; at times teenagers occupy spaces with minimal visibility so as to slip out af adult space; at other times they choose ta be visible; at the movie theater far example, when teenagers put themselves on display.

Fashian: Teenagers tend to reject that which adults provide far them: however, this is not true in terms af fashian. For example, Nike sneakers are marketed directly at teenagers and have tremendous success; disputes aver shaes have been knawn ta spark vialence among teenagers.

The architecture must deal with a client/patron perpetually in flux. The fashion industry is able to do this due to its ephemerality, or rather its use of relatively inexpensive materials and its constant adjustment to prevailing tastes in popular culture Fashion is accepted as a commadity that is replaced periadically—architecture is not However, there are examples af adjustability in the built environment due to the way that it is made, the billboard is able to change as required. The flat surface can be layered with up-to-the-minute messages adjusting to the popular taste.

The billbaard substitutes graphics for form; it substitutes dispensable materials far those which are permanent.

- Michael Pinto M Arch Thesis SCI-Arc Fall 1997 Advisor: Tam Buresh, Reader: Kazys Varnelis

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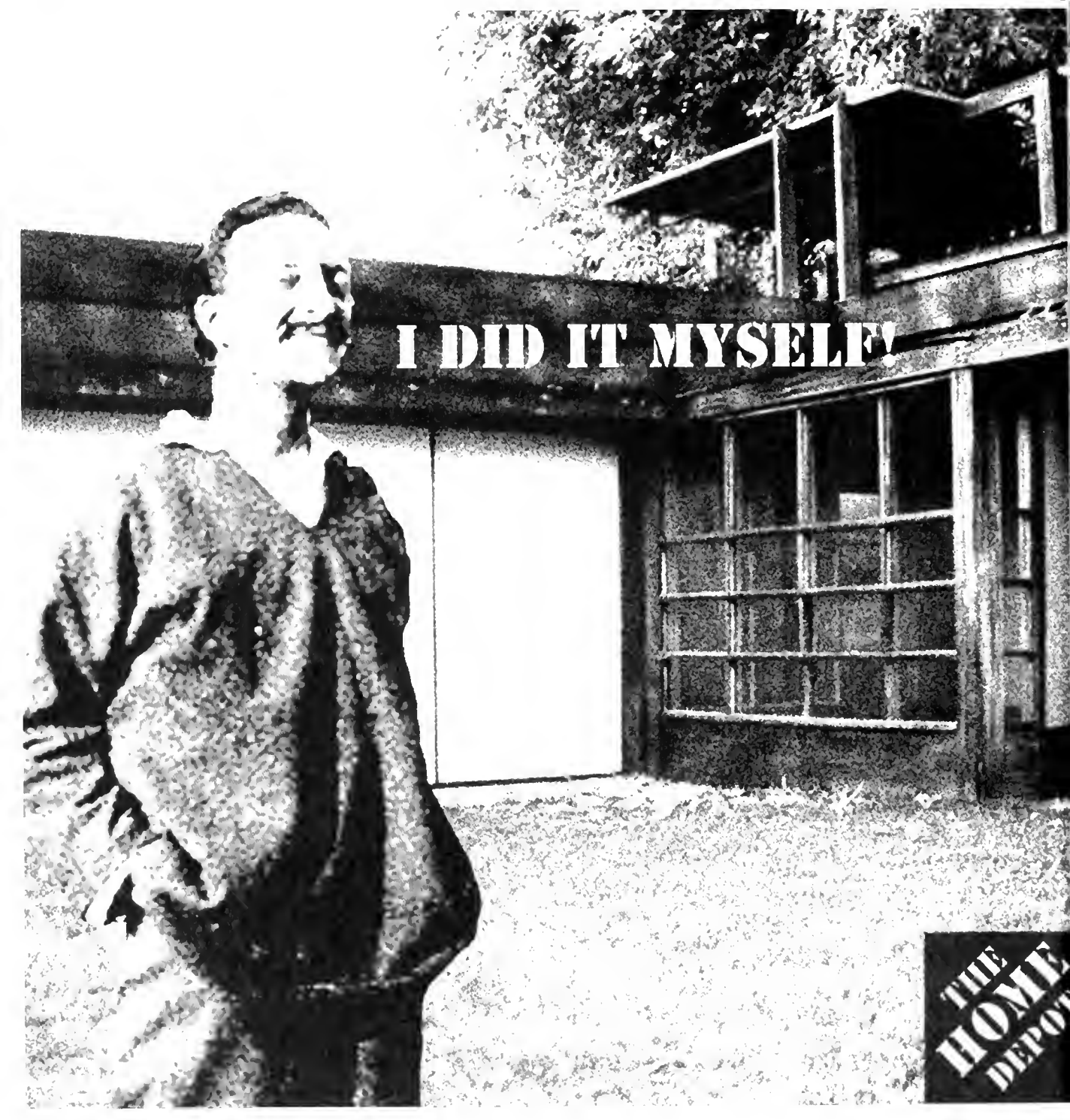

I DID IT MYSELF!
THE HOME DEPO

LETTER FRENCH SEE PORTRAIT OF THE COMMODITY AS A YOUNG IDEA SECTION THIS ORDER

THE PRE-DRAWN THING

Self-Accusation (after Peter Handke) or The Work of Art in the Age of Selection from Among Manufacturers' Manufactured Differences

BY JAMES P. O'BRIEN

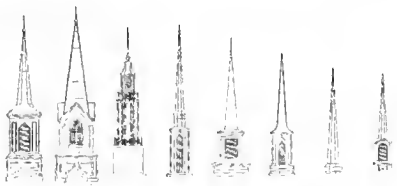
He worked. He worked in a manner that is known as working "full-time." He had never previously done anything in that sustained manner and to that extent generally considered something done "full-time." He worked enough consecutive months in that particular manner to be considered one who "has a permanent full-time job." He worked full-time in the field of his prior choice. He worked full-time in a field for which he was considered educated. He worked full-time in order to be considered as one who was participating in "his" profession on a "full-time basis." He worked full-time because he was expected to.

He could no longer obey only his own ideas. He was not afforded the opportunity to express his own ideas while working "full-time." He considered this fortunate however, as he was only capable of half-articulating his own ideas. He conditioned himself to the expression of ideas only under contrary circumstances. He now saw no other things he could call "ideas" other than those things that were contrary. He now discarded ideas that were not contrary to something else.

He had been asked to draw. He began to draw. He was paid primarily to draw. He now drew things, was only to be interested in drawing things, and was paid only to draw things that were "going to be there." He was not to draw anything that was "not going to be there."

"going to be there," regardless of where "there" was going to be:

the preeminence of the drawing over the thing:



THE *SIZE* OF THE STEEPLES ARE LEFT TO THE IMAGINATION OF THE ARCHITECT!

He had not previously been educated about "things that were going to be there." He began to look for things that were "going to be there." He found many pre-existing things that were "going to be there." He found many pre-existing things that were manufactured solely because they were "GOING TO BE THERE", REGARDLESS OF WHERE "THERE" WAS GOING TO BE.

He found that all of these pre-existing things were already drawn. He failed to recognize the significance of the fact that those things had already been drawn. He failed to recognize THE PREEMINENCE OF

THE DRAWING OVER THE THING. He recognized that many, many, many things had already been drawn. He initially failed, however, to recognize the significance of that fact.

He continued to draw. He was now cognizant of the existence of many things that were "going to be there." He allowed what he desired "to be there" to now become completely conditioned by what he had repeatedly found "to be there" somewhere else. He re-drew in his plans many of the things he desired "to be there." He failed to recognize however, the importance of the fact that these things were already pre-drawn by "someone else." He re-drew them anyway, and he inevitably, but always unintentionally, drew them incorrectly.

He continued to continue to draw to the point that he found the pre-existing things were already drawn so thoroughly that, aside from drawing them incorrectly, it would be impossible to re-draw them any better, more accurately, or more completely. He found that to re-draw a thing that had already been drawn was to draw that thing incorrectly. He finally recognized the preeminence of the drawing over the thing, when he isolated the fact that his attempts to draw things already drawn by "someone else" frequently got him into serious trouble.

He did not like that. He did not like drawing things that had already been drawn. He did not like the task of drawing ONLY those things that were simply "going to be there", yet still being incapable of drawing them correctly. He believed then that there was nothing he could correctly draw.

intentionally to change the things that were already drawn in order to achieve "desired effects;" in order to "design:"

He "designed" and "managed projects" and he continued to continue to draw. He began INTENTIONALLY (RATHER THAN INEVITABLY UN-INTENTIONALLY) TO CHANGE THE THINGS THAT WERE ALREADY DRAWN IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE "DESIRED EFFECTS"; IN ORDER TO "DESIGN." He initially felt it was necessary to change them in ways that it was not advisable, permissible or even possible to change them in order to achieve his "desired effects." He found that to be an un-practicable idea. He then researched and discovered only the ways it was advisable, permissible and possible to change things. He proceeded then to change things only in those ways it was advisable, permissible and possible. He found there was a simple, formulaic way of doing that. This was considered to be "successfully managing a project."

He neither liked nor disliked doing that:

He had no particular feelings for it.

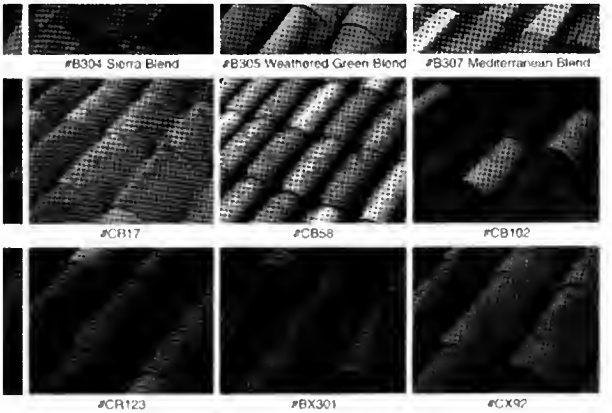
He could muster no rationale for changing things, one way or another, within the parameters of what was advisable, permissible or possible. He preferred, as a matter of fact, that someone else make those decisions about changes to pre-existing things; things that had already been drawn; although this was his largest responsibility. He found it did not matter

to him one way or another what decision someone else made about those things within the realm of WHAT WAS CONSIDERED ADVISABLE, PERMISSIBLE OR POSSIBLE.

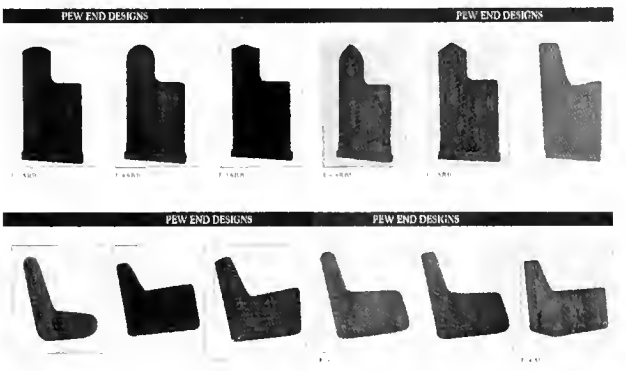
He became bored. He no longer found himself able to relax even if he were interested in doing so.

He had an idea. He discovered that these things that had already been drawn could be changed in all ways that were advisable, permissible or possible without drawing those changes. He found first that these decisions could be made in the written word. He found second that these decisions could be made in a written code; an "order." He then found that these decisions could be made solely by telling them to someone else. He liked that. He found that these decisions could be delegated solely by telling someone else that they were responsible for making them. He found that these decisions were everything when it came to "(drawing, or not drawing) the things that were going to be there." He found that these decisions could be made instantaneously, with documentation to come only later, and that many parties involved often preferred it be done that way.

what was considered advisable, permissible or possible:



to make what were considered "weighty" decisions in a groundless, trivial manner:



He liked this. He liked that there could be very little to do, once research was done, to affect great decisions that remained within the realm of those things considered "advisable, permissible and possible." He found that there was no special responsibility or liability he needed to take on for the making of such great decisions. He found he now cared about these changes he had previously not cared about solely because he needn't take responsibility for them. He found he now cared about these decisions only because others involved in them actually assumed he cared about them. He found that both people and aesthetics could be jerked around in this manner.

He now began to make decisions about these things that were completely within the parameters of what was advisable, permissible or possible in only arbitrary and capricious ways. He began TO MAKE WHAT WERE CONSIDERED "WEIGHTY" DECISIONS IN A GROUNDLESS, TRIVIAL MANNER. He did so only because he knew the people involved in executing those decisions would not only consider them inappropriate, but feel compelled to execute them anyway; and that the "thing to be there" would still be a thing considered "advisable, permissible and possible" regardless of the irrationality of his decisions about it. He also began to make what people considered very insignificant, minor decisions in a serious, reflective, grave and time consuming manner.

He did all that only because all those decisions, no matter what their degree of rationality, resulted only in a pre-existing, pre-drawn thing that was still considered "advisable, permissible and possible." He empirically validated the following fact: within the "advisable, permissible and possible," all the irrational decisions in the world could be made about a pre-existing, pre-drawn, "thing to be there" with out amounting to a hill of beans.

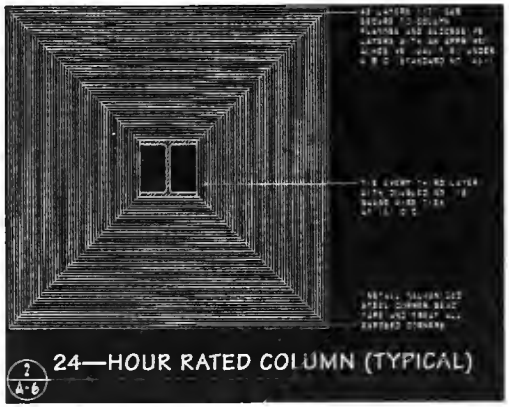
He found the more he looked, the more he saw pre-existing "things to be there." He found the sooner he looked, the sooner he found pre-existing "things to be there" were already there before he. He found the bigger he looked the bigger the pre-existing "things to be there" were. He found the pre-existing things could combine to encompass entire projects.

He found the more he looked between the pre-existing things the less he saw. He found the more he looked for people between the pre-existing things the less people he saw. He found the more he sought out relationships between pre-existing things the more he found only himself in a "space."

He found the RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE PRE-EXISTING THINGS OCCUR IN A "SPACE" IN AN INCREASINGLY GRAY, COMPLICATED, INDEFINABLE AND GENERALLY IRRELEVANT WAY. He found this space to be overwhelmed by the predominance of the pre-drawn things. He found it irrelevant to the significant aesthetic value of any given project. He found however, this to be the area in which he was encouraged by others to take responsibility and incur liability.

He found he was encouraged to work in this "space" (as much by recent architectural tradition as by the general undesirability of the job), by every party surrounding him in every given project. He found no one else interested in this space. He found this was the space where many believed architecture resided. He did not find it interesting solely due to that fact.

relationships between the pre-existing things occur in a "space" in an increasingly gray, complicated, undefinable and generally irrelevant way:



(he understands fully that it is simply not in their best interest to care.):

Maxxon underlayments are warranted to be free from manufacturing defects as defined in this warranty. Manufacturing defects are considered to be those

defects that occur due to the quality of the underlayment ingredients or from the manufacturing process itself. This warranty does not include labor costs and other costs or expenses associated with the removal or installation of any underlayment. Because Maxxono Corporation does not install the underlayment, it

cannot be held responsible for the results of the application. Maxxon Corporation specifically disclaims problems that occur due to weather conditions,

structural movement, structural design flaws and application techniques. This warranty is in lieu of all other warranties expressed or implied including the warranty of merchantability and fitness of purpose and of all other obligations or liabilities on Maxxon Corporation's part. Maxxon Corporation neither

assumes, nor authorizes any person to assume for Maxxon Corporation, any liability with the sale and installation of any of its floor underlayments.

He found the nature and extent of the work necessary to take responsibility for this space to be: excessive, thankless, without proper compensation, unable to be assessed as to what would be proper compensation, basically consisting of choosing from among inconsequential differences, pointless, invariably unable to meet its demands, invariably unable to limit its own parameters and scope on even the smallest of projects; unending, relatively unimportant in comparison to other things; against his nature, relatively "fussy", petty, ignoble, time-consuming, costly, a "catch 22," a no-win situation, a dead-end, non-productive work, and boring.

He found, as a matter of fact, that when pressed, EACH PARTY RESPONSIBLE FOR A GIVEN "THING TO BE THERE" WAS EXTREMELY FRIGHTENED AND OR TRAUMATIZED BY THIS "SPACE."

He found as well, that no party responsible for a given "thing

to be there" was particularly interested in the decisions that go into the making of any *other* "thing to be there", no matter how significantly or extensively it comprised the "project at hand." (HE UNDERSTANDS FULLY THAT IT IS SIMPLY NOT IN THEIR BEST INTEREST TO CARE.) He does not find, however, that their lack of interest makes it in his best interest to care. He acknowledges as well that it must be a hell of a lot of fun to design the "things that are to be there", without a care in the world for any other "thing to be there" and repeatedly get away with it. He was more concerned about this lack of a larger view than ingratiated by the encouragement and "opportunity" to function as a permanent Johnny on the Spot in this "space."

He had spent enough time. It was deemed that he had spent enough time participating within his chosen profession on a full-time basis that he was then offered the opportunity to qualify, through the endurance of a four-day exam, to be considered as one who is always, from that point on, completely within the profession, **regardless** of where, under whom, and how frequently he actually "participates" within the profession. He accepted this opportunity to so qualify. He managed to successfully qualify. He became a "professional architect."

He now carries the credentials to legally assume complete responsibility and liability for all decisions he makes. He has already found, however, that the majority of the decisions he made, which constituted the bulk of his "full-time" working responsibility, required no liability be taken for them. He had indeed already found that it is possible to complete an entire project composed of pre-existing things: things already drawn; without making decisions significant enough that responsibility be taken for them.

He believes that to work without making decisions significant enough that responsibility be taken for them is a desirable way to work in comparison to other possible ways to work. He believes this to be a positively progressive way to work in order to gain more meaningful responsibility and shed less significant responsibility in his chosen profession. He believes it's apparent shirking of responsibility would appear CONTRARY to what many believe to be progressive. He therefore believes it to be a "good idea."

He believes that the pre-existing things are drawn so thoroughly solely due to the fact that the "space", the world around those things, is viewed to simply not exist. He refuses to be designated, simply because of that fact, as that party responsible for this space that contains all the different ways in which each and every pre-existing thing is combined, coupled, linked, separated, elevated, lowered, aligned and/or juxtaposed. He believes he can be responsible for this space in a more over-all, general, and creative manner when acting at a greater distance from it.

He believes as well it would be unreasonable to avoid using these pre-existing things, regardless of the fact that each pre-existing thing does not recognize the existence of any other thing nor the existence of the "space" between the things. He therefore finds he is interested in using these pre-existing things while pawning-off responsibility for the complicated "space" in-between to someone else or to no one else in particular.

HE BELIEVES HIS "DESIRED EFFECTS" CAN BE ACHIEVED RATIONALLY WITHIN THIS IRRATIONAL "SPACE" RELEGATED TO HIM ONLY BY ENCASING ALL DECISIONS ABOUT, AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR THAT "SPACE" INTO THE DECISIONS MADE BY OTHERS ABOUT THE PRE-EXISTING THINGS.

He believes his own pushing and prodding of those in control of all the "things that are to be there" is his best vestige of control, and, incidentally, artistic creation.

He believes he may be able to work better this way: standing away from, above, out of harm's way and out of range of this "space" in which he had been training to unite thousands of things that do not speak the same language. He believes that this is a "space" that any sane person would find a demented, senseless and unbalanced atmosphere in which to work. HE HAD FOUND THAT THIS IS A "SPACE" WHERE ANY SORT OF IRRATIONAL ACTS COULD BE CONSIDERED RATIONAL.

He does not believes this "space" represents his last vestige for control. He believes it represents his oppression.

He believes that this "space" is dangerous.

He believes that to continue to take "passive" responsibility for this space erodes his profession. HE BELIEVES THAT TO "ACTIVELY" **NOT** TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS SPACE WOULD BE A SENSIBLE WAY TO ACT AT THIS TIME.

He therefore believes it would be desirable to take on entire projects solely in order to design them without taking on any liability for their "being there;" although he would, admittedly, be solely responsible in the general sense for "their being there."

He believes that this would be a difficult task. He believes, however, it is currently the only prudent task to undertake. He believes it is profoundly more plausible than acting within this space in ineffective ways, yet deeming oneself to be responsible for it.

He is completely intrigued by the prospect of undertaking this task.

He is going to undertake it.

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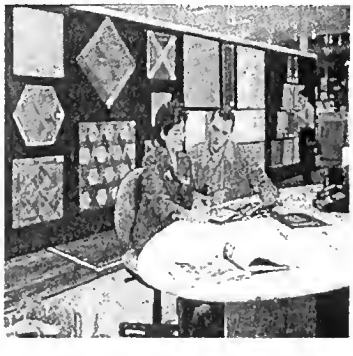
THE 'X' = CONSUMER/PRODUCER

The Architecture of desired effects (after Bertolt Brecht 's Dramatic Theater)	**The Architecture of an *'x'*** (after Bertolt Brecht 's Epic Theater)
1 Dictates how things are best done.	1 Admits things have been done by others. Architect is just taking a crack at it.
2 WEARS DOWN *'x's'* CAPACITY FOR ACTION	2 AROUSES *'x's'* CAPACITY FOR ACTION
2a "I could never do that well, that beautifully."	2a "Hey I could do that,..or maybe this, or ..THIS!"
2b Total architecture, *'x'* surrounded by the complete creation.	2b Not total creation. Existing objects assembled, pushed together, in an inconclusive manner
3 Provides *'x'* with sensations	3 Forces *'x'* to make decisions.
4 An "experience."	4 A "picture of the world."
5 *'X'* faces the architect's decisions, opinions and techniques	5 *'X'* must face decisions, opinions and techniques existing in the world around s/he and architect.
6 Suggestion of an undefined "newness"	6 Argument with a definable present.
7 Instinctive view of the traditional process of building preserved.	7 Recognition of the modern vernacular process of building
Instinctive feelings about architect's influence on production preserved	Recognition of others' influence on production.
Instinctive belief in heroism of architect preserved	Recognition of the disenfranchised position of the architect.
8 *'X'* must be in thick of it, play a role in the architecture, as the architect believes *'x'* "wasn't formerly involved in architecture"	8 *'X'* stands outside, studies the architecture, as the architect believes *'x'* is "involved in architecture daily"
9 *'X's'* ability to produce not addressed.	9 *'X's'* production is the object of the inquiry.
10 *'X's'* inability to produce is unalterable.	10 *'X's'* ability to produce is alterable and able to alter the architect's ability.
11 Eyes on the finish.	11 Eyes on the course.
12 One project begets another.	12 Each project for itself
13 Growth of architect's influence over "others."	13 Montage of existing influence of "others."
14 Consistent, linear development	14 Sporadic development, in fits and starts.
15 The architect participates at a fixed point	15 The architect's participation is an evolving process
16 Thought determines being	16 Social being determines thought
Architect as creator determines materials/meaning	consumer culture determines materials/meaning.
17 Moves back to identification with specific materials	17 Move away from specific materials and towards shopping
18 Education, talent or myth placed between *'x'* and the architect	18 Elimination of artificial distance between *'x'* and the architect.
19 New preferred over existing	19 An investigation of existing
20 Transcend existing methods by alternatives invented	20 Transcend existing methods by using and debating them.

OVERTISEMENT ADVERTISEMENT ADVERTISEMENT

OUR EXPO CONCEPT IS MOVING US TOWARD THE NEXT GENERATION OF STORES SPECIFICALLY AIMED AT SERVING CUSTOMERS UNDERGOING MAJOR HOME RENOVATION OR REMODELING PROJECTS. THE EXPO DESIGN CENTER NOT ONLY OFFERS A BROAD ASSORTMENT OF MERCHANDISE, IT ALSO PROVIDES CONSULTING SERVICES FROM DESIGN PROFESSIONALS AND PROJECT COORDINATORS WHO HELP CUSTOMERS' PROJECTS FLOW SMOOTHLY THROUGH COMPLETION.



TER LAURENCE

SEE 'PORTRAIT OF THE COMMODITY AS A YOUNG IDEA' SECTION 3

'Report to Stockholders'

THIS WONDERFUL WORLD OF MOBILE HOME LIVING

Trailer Talk: What Was, What Might Be

This work is about tactics. It negotiates the use of tactics in a given context where the architect does not have the power to radically change the rules of building. Much in the spirit of Michel deCerteau's emphasis in THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE, *Sigfusson studies and accepts the dominant practices of those in power— "in charge of"—the factory manufactured production of homes to be trucked to practically any site. The only questions Sigfusson poses to the hegemonic web of codes, manufacturers and governmental agencies currently controlling the production of manufactured homes are those questions that carry direct tactical possibilities. These possibilities she will exploit in her design of two, innovative, but "doable", manufactured mobile homes. Sigfusson responds to the possibilities she uncovers quite strategically in both the text and designs that follow. Her architectural production—that of the architect as consumer "powerless" in the face of the constructed rules of the manufacturers' vernacular—is empowering in and of itself. Its precise and committed pragmatic analysis clears a real space for innovative* AND *practicable designs. —eds.*

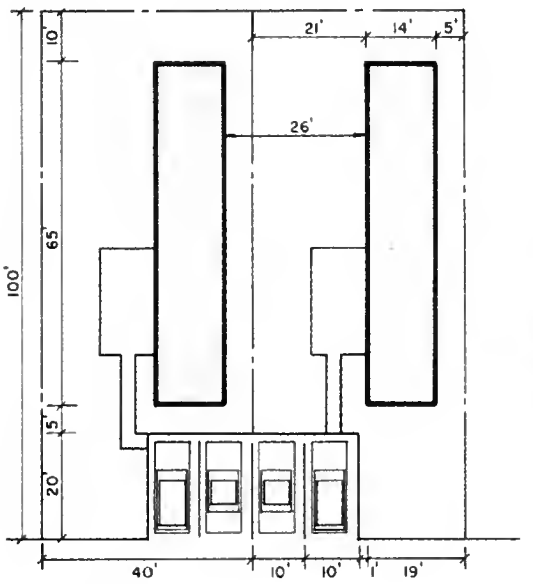
A DESIGN PROPOSAL BY GERDUR SIGFUSSON

Taking the "rules" of manufactured housing as design parameters

The project was initiated with the surprising discovery that 25% of the new housing market in the United States is comprised of manufactured homes (mobile homes). Yet despite this large share of the market, the manufactured home still suffers from severe stigmatization. Many factors contribute to this problem, including zoning ordinances, federal regulations and financing. These issues are being addressed by the industry, federal and state regulators, and homeowners. This proposal looks at ways of reducing that stigma from yet another perspective, that of design. It begins with a simple question; how might the manufactured home as an existing type be rethought, within the framework of current manufacturing processes and legal restrictions, in order to not only better its position as an alternative to the conventional single family home but also be seen as an alternative for a broader market. Particular attention is given to social use, spatial improvements and land use innovations.

Manufactured homes are made assembly line style in factories throughout the country. Depending on the manufacturer, a home can be made in as little as a day. This manufacturing process allows for prices as low as $39,000 for a three bedroom single wide home. Modular homes are made in much the same way and often in the same factories. However, the metal chassis which is a permanent part of the manufactured home is the major difference distinguishing the two. Manufactured homes conform to the federal H.U.D. code regarding performance and are also regulated by states regarding dimensions and transportation issues. Currently, the maximum dimensions during transport are 16' wide, 80'

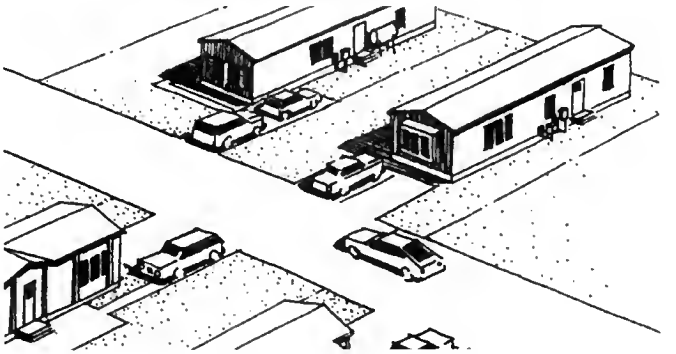
long and 13'-6" high. Once on site, the hitch, axle and wheel may be removed and the home is permanently installed



4,000 SQUARE FEET LOT

using a variety of available methods. Regardless of the quality of the manufactured home development, transportation and set up issues, the relatively uniform size and proportion of the homes have ingrained long standing siting configurations which are less than ideal, far from conventional, and hardly conducive to any known standards of private/public mediation.

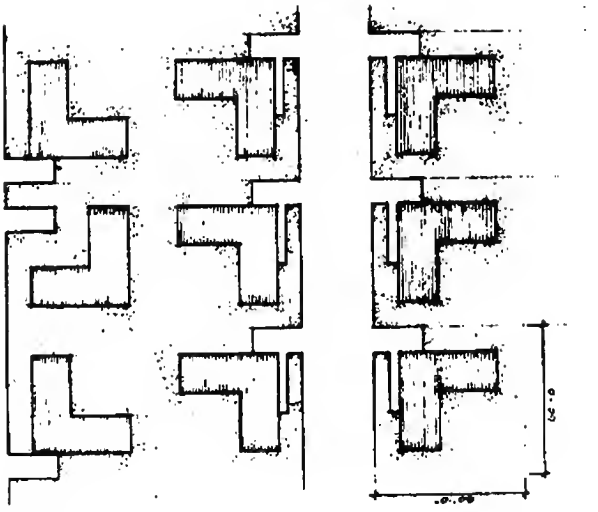
The homes are generally planned on any site with their short end parallel to the street and the long sides perpendicular to it. This type of neighborhood layout is directly linked to the proportion and size of the manufactured home. This layout creates confusion regarding front, back, and side yards and generates problems of privacy. Traditionally, front facade and entry occupy the same face of a home and are part of a subtle but clear transition from public space. In the case of the manufactured home development, the long main facade and entry are located on the side of the home. As a result, what is traditionally front and back is now on the side, and visa versa. The traditional back yard is all but obliterated as it becomes one's neighbor's front yard. In some cases, the long side of the home does face the street, but the effect is equally unsatisfying because the overly attenuated proportion of the rectangle.



The siting configuration also has direct implications on internal privacy. In order to shield itself from its neighbors, the manufactured home has few and small openings. The result is a closed and rather claustrophobic interior. The claustrophobic feeling is exacerbated by the low ceiling heights.

Strategizing the "rules" into a design proposal

The proposal takes the existing double-wide convention of joining two parallel units on site but adapts it to an L-SHAPE configuration. The relationship of this home to its neighbors and the street is dramatically different from current models. The house creates a series of thresholds from the public space of the street to the private space of the backyard. It allows for a connection, both visually and spatially, between the interior and the exterior.



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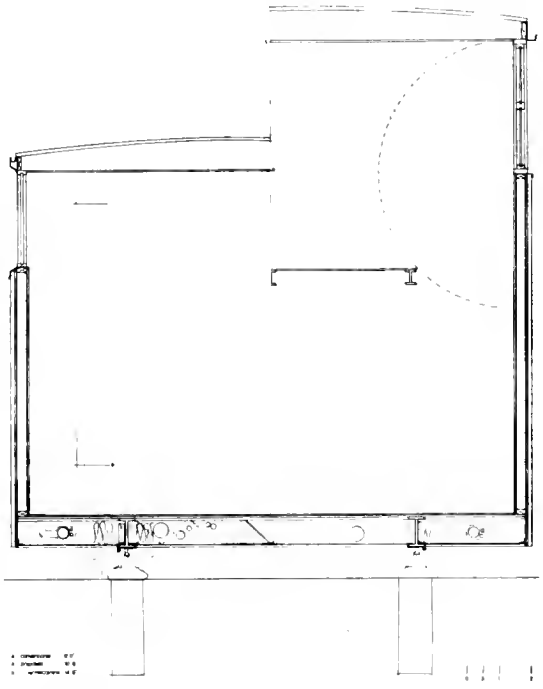
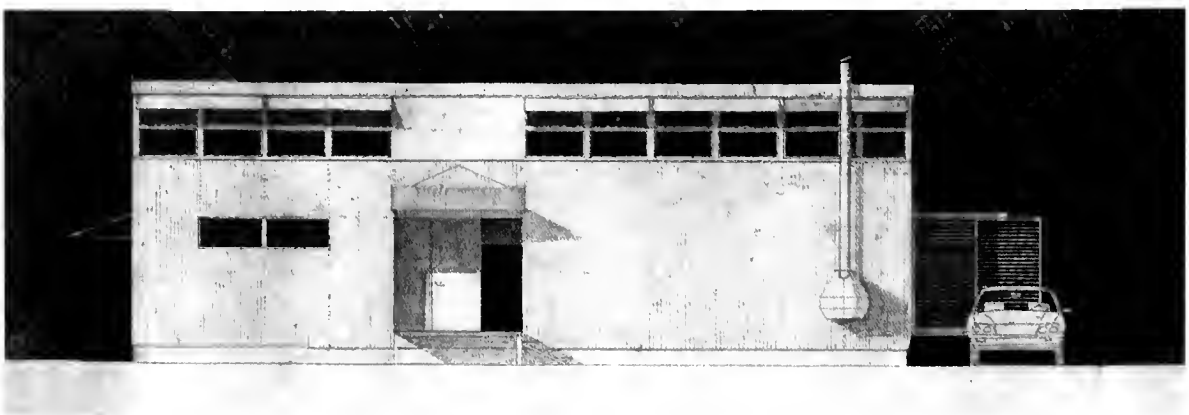
The breaking of an 80' unit into two units yet transporting both by one vehicle is possible by the twin trailer and goose neck systems already in use in other industries. The goose-neck places the wheels behind each unit thereby lowering



the home significantly during transport. Lowering the home during transport allows for greater interior ceiling height, which is currently as low as 7' in some cases. To further increase the ceiling height of the home, the subfloor system of the chassis and floor frame are reconfigured to reduce redundancy of systems. The systems housed in the floor frame—the plumbing, electrical wiring, and vents—are located within the space of the chassis, which until now has only served the function of bearing the load of the house. Open web joists would be used to facilitate the piping and to increase stability. The idea of a pitched roof, while popular, is altered to gain additional height. The roof would be a shallow barrel type, similar to those once found on manufactured homes. The gain of interior vertical space has thus been increased to 10"-6". This can be increased to 14'-6" in parts with the use of a hinged section of wall. Here a clerestory allows for a mezzanine level and increased natural light. Hinging systems already exists in the industry to achieve higher pitched roofs by folding each panel down during transport and fixing it in place once on site. Instead of hinging the roof, a section of wall just under the roof is hinged and folded into the home during transport then flipped up and fixed once on site. The roof would be temporarily attached during transport then lifted on site to accommodate the folded wall section, then permanently fixed in place. The ceiling height under and on the mezzanine is 7'-0" and would be appropriate to function as kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms. The clerestory and the mezzanine improve the interior dimensions of the home and differ dramatically from conventional manufactured homes. The space is no longer linear and horizontal, but extends vertically, spatially and visually.



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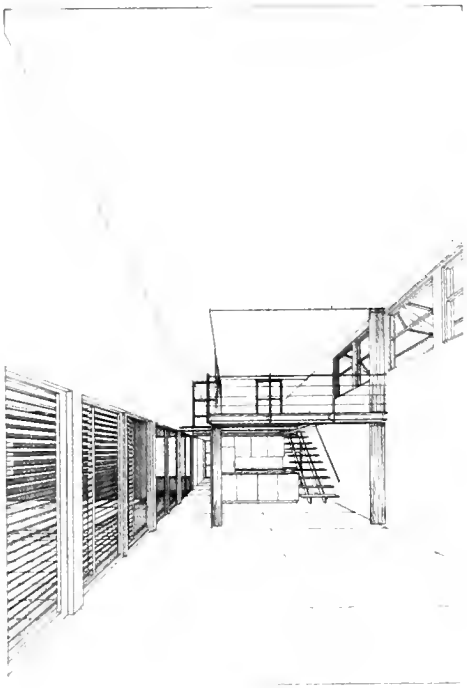
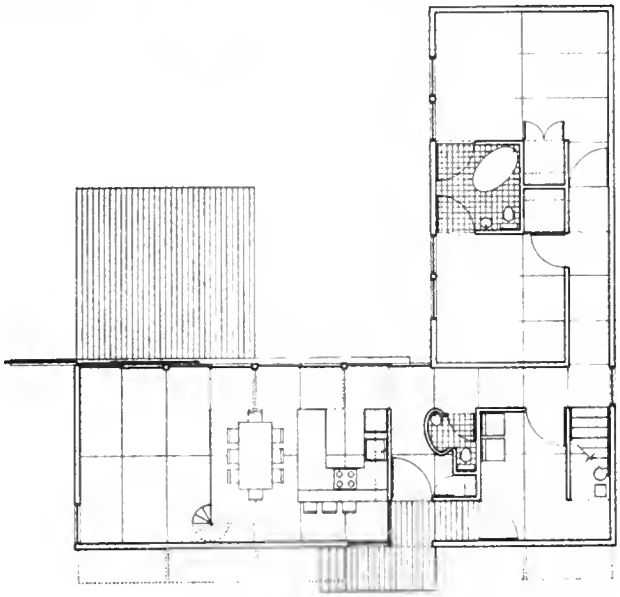
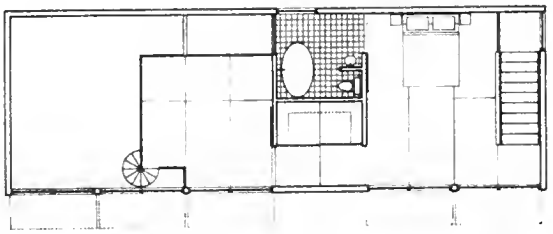
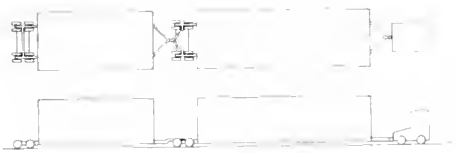
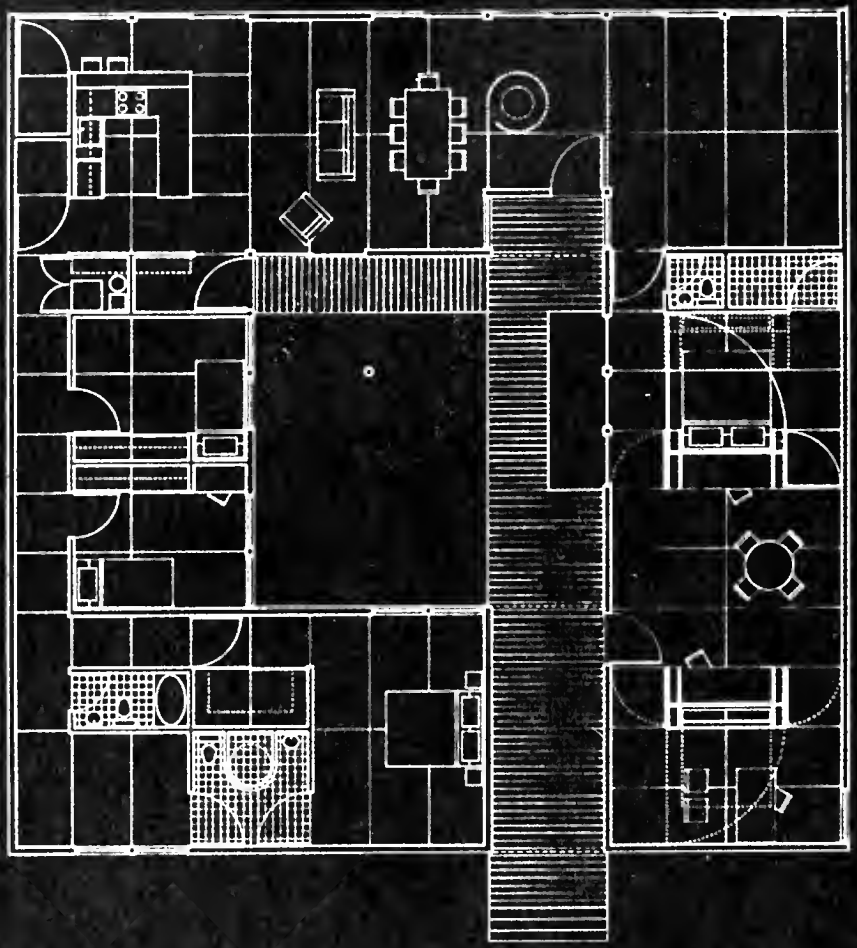


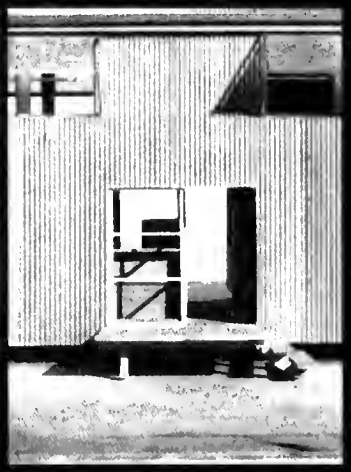


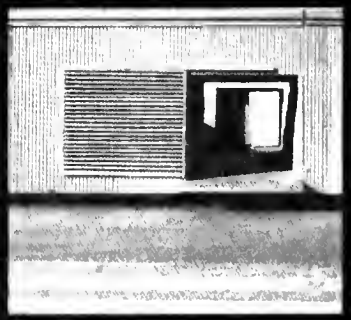




GERDUR SIGFUSSON







The primary configuration for a home delivered on two trucks (in four parts) allows for a COURTYARD HOUSE. Similar to the L-house, the courtyard house sets up a series of thresholds from front to back, from public to private. The courtyard delivers visual and spatial extensions to the private rooms which encircle it, while the rear yard does the same for the public spaces of the house.

Afterword: The Twentieth Century Transformations of the trailer

The notion of mobile dwellings can be traced back centuries, however, the idea of a mobile home which relies on motor vehicle transportation dates to the early part of this century. The first of these dwellings were homes made and meant purely for recreational use. They were small and crude in construction. The idea caught on and this type of travel and vacationing became increasingly popular. Small companies were established and production line assembly began. By 1936 the industry as we know it today was established. Most of the designs were similar in interior arrangements/amenities and all alluded to the notion of mobility through their aerodynamic designs. Parks were established to accommodate these homes and they included all the amenities not possible in the home itself. At that time the parks were seen as a way to attract visitors and increase revenues for the towns in which they were located. As time passed, the visitors stayed longer and longer. Since these homes were very mobile, instances of stealing away in the night without paying your bill became frequent. Opinions of the "trailer" people were low and persist to this day. Those that live in manufactured homes are seen as migrant. The parks in which they live are seen as devaluing the property which surrounds them. Since the spaces were rented, the owners paid no tax to the community and were seen as free loaders. Although this is not the case today, the perception persists.

The use of the trailers as recreational dwellings started to change after the depression and was drastically altered during the 1940s when the United States entered the war. The government purchased a vast quantity of mobile homes for defense production workers who needed to live close to the plants. The size of the trailers increased in length to over 30 feet and started to include bathrooms and permanent kitchens. All the conveniences of a true home—gas, electricity, hot and cold running water—were available, although at a much smaller scale. The distinction between the recreational vehicle or trailer and the mobile home as we know it today began to take place during this time. The mobile home had been proven to be a cost effective solution to affordable housing. The production of trailers for recreational use (which remain a truer descendent of the old trailer than the current manufactured home) continues and is a large industry in and by itself.

In the 1950s the mobile home was built to lengths up to 50 feet long and 10 feet wide. It had to be transported by trucks and new laws were enacted regarding highway travel. To increase interior space it started to lose its aerodynamic aesthetic in favor of squared corners. As the number of these homes being used as permanent dwellings increased, so did the problems associated with them. The majority of these homes were purchased and used by lower income families and prejudices against these owners were evidenced in the zoning ordinances designed to locate these parks on the less desirable town peripheries.

The 1960s produced even larger homes and saw the invention of the double-wide. This was a response to a demand for larger living spaces while travel width remained limited. As the two unit double-wide necessitated assembly on site, the homes became more permanent. The continued legal definition of these homes as vehicles meant that they did not have to conform to local building codes. The manufacturers established their own association; the *Mobile Home Craftsmen Guild*, and set their own specification and system of compliance. The sales of these homes increased four fold through the 60s. In the 1970s one third of all new single family homes were manufactured homes.

Although the industry tried to regulate itself, a number of problems persisted which led to the establishment of the H.U.D. Code in 1976. This federal code is based on the performance of the home. It has changed very little since 1976, although it is currently being scrutinized by the industry and consumers alike. One aspect which is hotly debated is the metal chassis on which the mobile home is built. It is the basic legal defining element of the mobile home: the thing that separates it from its cousin the modular home, and requires it to be federally regulated, as opposed to conforming to state and local building codes.

It is estimated that only between 3 and 10 percent of mobile homes are ever relocated once on site. Acknowledging this

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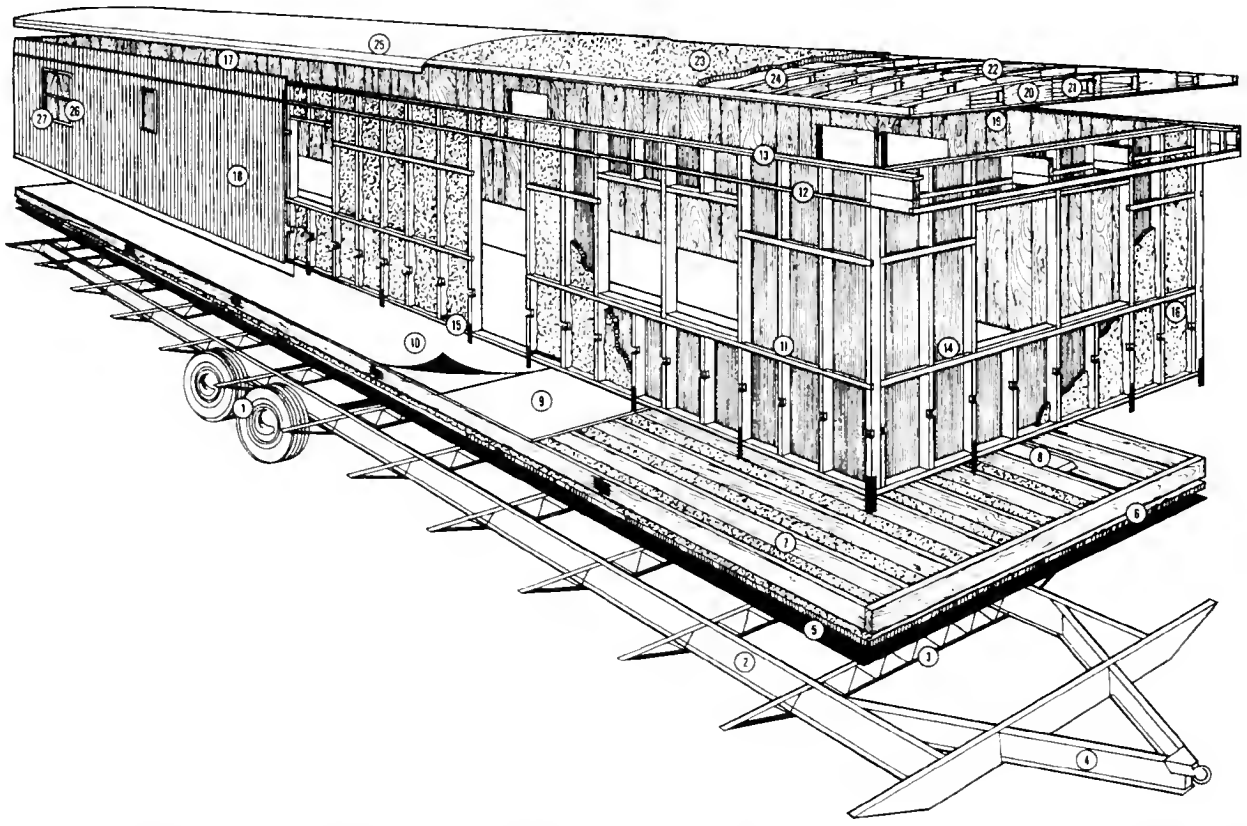

fact, H.U.D. has allowed for the removal of the hitch, the axle and the tires from the home once on site, however the removal of the chassis has not been allowed and will most likely not change in the near future.

Issues of taxation, financing and zoning still plague the manufactured home, even though it now comprises 25% of all dwellings in the US. The practice of financing and taxing the manufactured home as a vehicle has been reduced dramatically. In some places zoning ordinances have been modified to deter discrimination based on method of construction. However, these homes are still not perceived as legitimate by many, and are not yet seen by consumers as being on par with the conventional housing market.

Manufactured homes today range widely in quality, price, size and style. Prices range from $20,000 to well over $100,000. Most are still located in "parks" or developments specially designed and zoned for them. While some states have started passing regulations banning discriminations based on construction type, often these regulations mandate a minimum size; thereby discriminating against single wide homes. Other city or neighborhood ordinances regarding aesthetics manage to effectively exclude the manufactured home by simply excluding structures of their typical size, proportions, height, and exterior finishes.

Gerdur Sigfusson completed her Master of Architecture degree at MIT in May 1997. This work is an excerpt from her Master's thesis.

VERTISEMENT ADVERTISEMENT ADVERTISEMENT

THE HOME DEPOT

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HELPING

HAVANA: the fragrance of revolution

Revolution and Consumption in Postmodern Cuban Culture

BY FRANK VALDES

There is no denying that the Cuban Revolution has inevitably altered the terms of Cuban cultural identity. The Revolution has impacted our perception of Cuban art, music and food, and has been a catalyst for casting divisions in Cuban cultural life in general. It has separated island Cubans from the exodus community. Those in power have deliberately created a variety of perceptions of the Revolution of 1959 by manipulating its portrayal in both the popular press and the arts. It is where these two worlds—the popular press and the arts, which have been so manipulated in Cuba since 1959—come together that the recent work of Cuban artists Jose Toirac and Pedro Alvarez can be situated. Their work portrays a critically postmodern view of the Revolution and its inter play with/effect on culture.

Postmodernism in socialist Cuba? What is this? Generally, cultural production is immediately termed postmodern, in almost any culture, when it takes the identity of a "crisis project." In the example of Latin America this is true of work on the crisis of the political left, particularly when dealing with the failings of the socialist project in Cuba. Reality struck a cord when Cuba had to implement its "special period" after the abandonment of Soviet subsidies in the early 1990s. In the "special period" the utopian ideology of the Cuban revolution began to lose credibility when it faced the reality of a shortage of food, which exposed the regime as perhaps being one of more image than substance.

The epidemic loss of faith in the possibility of a socialist utopia has had a deep effect on all sectors of Cuban cultural life. Particularly it has engendered a rise of a postmodern, post-utopian sensibility among Cuban artists. Accordingly, the essence of the postmodernist debate in Latin America is not a game of categorizing postmodern works and tactics in art, but an attempt by artists to redefine the actual links between aesthetics and politics in an age of catastrophic social change.

It is in the tight space left between aesthetics and politics under postmodernity that one can begin to look for the work of Jose Toirac. To use capitalist consumerism as an instrument of critique, Toirac, a painter by trade, finds himself of necessity appropriating the advertising graphics and photography of others to generate much of his imagery. His work often criticizes modes of representation, especially those sanctioned by the Cuban government. Some of the images manipulated by Toirac are deconstructions of political representations of official discourse. These images are simply displaced and represented in a new and different context, usually a capitalist one, by Toirac. This destruction and reconstruction of revolutionary images forms a new mode representation which reveals new messages and meanings.

According to Toirac, the only truthful way to represent the Cuban Revolution is to represent it for what it is—a contemporary image. Not as reality, but as a representation of what "was" or "was to be" the "revolutionary ideal." Photographs by Raul Corales and Alberto Korda of Cuban revolutionaries— including Castro in the Sierra Maestra during the Revolution—offer clear "presentations" of the "revolutionary ideal." Taken in 1960 and 1962, the photographs are obviously post-Revolution propaganda, not unlike Roosevelt re-enacting his own battles for film crews. Castro had inevitably realized the importance of public image and returned to the Sierra Maestra in the early 60's to stage these "revolutionary" scenarios for media consumption. When asked about his impressions of the theatrical quality of these photographs, Toirac simply answered, "Fidel es un artista...": Fidel is an artist.

Toirac is by no means implying that Castro is a con artist, but rather he sincerely believes that Castro is an artist. Castro composes political scenarios, and understands their cultural operations, the way an artist composes a canvas. Castro has himself been indoctrinated by mass cultural strategies, and is aware of the power and importance of visual imagery in that society. The photographs clearly exploit the modes of dissemination of the capitalist system he rejects. Toirac uses these images in his work. By exposing the affiliations between aesthetics and politics within the Cuban Revolution, Toirac reveals how the myth of photo-

graphic objectivity is used to construct a history, which in turn, serves to legitimize, consolidate, and perpetuate power. But there is more; the layer Toirac adds to the photographic propaganda is a layer of consumer culture imagery specifically selected by the artist for its punning or symbolic meaning(s) that are able to penetrate (expose) the propaganda itself.

The literary critic Gregory Ulmer asserts that postmodern deconstruction is in fact accomplished by borrowing the very terms utilized by the host work itself and removing or detaching them from one conceptual set or semantic field and reattaching them to another. This appears to be both the technique and the motivation behind Toirac's work.

Toirac's *New Times* Series

It is evident, especially in Cuba, that the socialist crisis in Latin America has caused drastic political and cultural changes. The re-emergence of capitalist forms of advertisement are to be listed among these changes and are a central theme in Toirac's *New Times* series. This series uses political advertisements, Cuban press photographs of the governmental movers and shakers, and consumer oriented commercial advertising as the the host to the work. By detaching the original message of those images and reattaching them to others in unique ways, new and often very cynical messages from a post-utopian Cuba are created in this series.

In "Trumpf" the triumph of the Revolution is conveyed through the immediately recognizable image of the young revolutionaries, Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, entering victoriously into Havana in 1959, while the opposing message of the recent triumph of capital is conveyed by the equally recognizable red, diamond shaped Trumpf logo of the German candy corporation owned by the art collector Peter Ludwig. The painting has a number of meanings. The reference to Ludwig's candy company alludes to the current return of a pre-Revolutionary condition in Cuba wherein Cuba acts primarily as a producer of cheap raw materials for foreign manufacturers.

In 1989, Ludwig came to the Third Havana Biennial and bought great quantities of contemporary Cuban art. Apparently however, Ludwig did not come to Cuba solely for that purpose. He may have also been there to negotiate with the Cuban government to export cheap Cuban cocoa and sugar to Germany. Ludwig could then turn around and import expensive German chocolate to the Cuban people. The allusion to this sort of economic policy in Toirac's "Trumpf" painting makes Castro's 1953 "History will absolve me" speech seem particularly ironic, and ring particularly false today. As a condemnation of the pre-Revolutionary regime of Fulgencio Batista, in that speech Castro had lamented that Cuba "exports sugar to import candy..."

The Trumpf logo is also a particularly cogent signifier within the Cuban art world itself. From 1959 to 1989, Cuban art was largely absent from the international art market. But in 1989, exactly 30 years after Castro and his rebels triumphantly entered Havana, Ludwig triumphantly entered the Cuban art scene. Since 1989, the interests of an international art market (singularly personified by Ludwig,) have replaced the State as the primary patron of young Cuban artists. The obvious play on words of Trumpf/triumph is thus a poignant, wry commentary on the more pragmatic than revolutionary "triumph" of socialism in post-utopian Cuba.

Toirac's deconstruction of revolutionary triumph offers a compelling critique of the theatrically orchestrated political image and of the failure of its emancipatory message.

The work in this series also critiques Western representations of consumerism and its common message of want and consumption as the central needs of the people in contemporary culture. For example, the conceptual impact of a term such as eternity is appropriated by advertisers in contemporary culture. In order to sell perfume, Calvin Klein labeled one fragrance *Eternity*. While this aggrandizes perfume, the concept of eternity is trivialized through its use as a logo. Toirac picks up on this in his painting "Eternity", wherein he appropriates Klein's logo, with its new trivialized concept of eternity, and super-imposes it over an

official image of Castro's performing his anti-imperialism speech. The consumer image becomes an accomplice to the political speech act of Castro. By superimposing a text that signifies consumerism onto an image that immediately signifies socialist Cuba, Toirac exploits an inversion of socialist narrative in which political ideology is incrementally being pragmatized and replaced with slogans, as per modern consumerism. The paradoxical combination of the ad and the political photo creates a new compound image which effectively communicates the current impermanence and legitimation crisis of socialist ideology in Cuba.

The painting "Havana Cigars" also touches upon the current ideological shifts in Cuba. The message is delivered by the direct appropriation of the text from a Cuban magazine ad for Cuban cigars. The text; "Even a masterpiece may not last forever...," is superimposed over an image of Castro as a young revolutionary. The comic intention is understood immediately—the viewer's nervous laughter registers uncertainty amidst an uncertain society.

Toirac's work is broadly political in the sense that it deconstructs ideologies. But his most powerful imagery is a result of the deconstruction of the specificities of Cuban politics. In this light, the issue of censorship is relevant. Although Toirac has not been specifically prohibited from creating his imagery, exhibitions of his work in venues outside of the Cuban curatorial ability to control its message and reading have been prohibited.

Toirac has stated that, "Censorship, more than outright prohibition, represents one of the mechanisms that power uses to mask its relations . . . Manipulation, for its part, entertains the prohibitions of power, but also negotiates its tolerance." For Toirac, distinctions between governmental censorship and artistic manipulation are but a few of the many aspects of repetition and appropriation that are employed in the formation and dispersal of meaning. Censorship and manipulation are therefore elements to be incorporated, deconstructed, and recontextualized.

As it became apparent that the exhibition in the United States of the original *New Times* series would not be permitted by the Cuban Consejo National de Artes Plasticas, Toirac created a second version. Apropos to his interest in the transformation of meaning through the appropriation and repetition of the image, Toirac appropriated himself in this second version. The second version, identical to the first in terms of style, title, and dimensions, substituted the face of the artist's wife, Meira Marrero, for that of Fidel Castro. Thus Meira Marrero is simply a code for the meanings intended.

As we have seen in the work of Toirac, the failures of the emancipatory project of Cuban socialism—especially since Cuba is seen, and sees itself, as the model for socialist revolution among many Third World countries—have played an important role in determining the specific shape of postmodern cultural production in Cuba. For other Cuban artists, these failures are registered in themes of a temporality and nostalgia, when likened to the collapse of a Marxism which privileges time as the main element through which forward progress is understood. Not as a nostalgia for lost narratives and lost utopias, but a pragmatic progression towards a better future replaces the concept of a return to, or the "presence of," the past. It is in terms of a temporal, nostalgic aspect of Cuban postmodernism that we can describe the work of Pedro Alvarez.

Pedro Alvarez: *Havana Dollarscape*

Cuban history often surfaces in contemporary Cuban art in the form of familiar, popular images and stereotypes from Cuba's colonial past. The historical narratives in an Alvarez painting appear to take place in a vague temporality where the landscape is populated with icons from various periods in Cuban history which revisit Cuba's present like ancestral ghosts.

In the painting entitled "After Andaluce," a bust of Karl Marx becomes the object of a servant's affections and the target for an Alvarez parody. Alvarez appropriated the parody from the nineteenth-century artist Victor Landaluce's painting "Don Francisco." Landaluce is well known in Cuba and elsewhere for social caricature; the

FRANK VALDES

Government funded "graffiti" in Havana

images in his paintings often represent the picturesque and the cliche elements of nineteenth century Cuban culture. According to Alvarez, Landluce's images represent a fundamental referent for a reconstructed image of Cuba that is an idealization without conflict, essentialism or temporality.

Cubans experience the presence of the past in their day-to-day lives. A sense of temporality is felt quite strongly in the contradictions that show themselves daily in the streets of Havana. Government sponsored political graffiti of a now defunct utopia continues to share Cuban streets with colonial architecture and American cars from the 1950's.

In a painting by Alvarez entitled "We will not return to the past, not ever," he incorporates Landluce's "Preparing for the Fiesta." Landluce's *mulata* are shown washing a shiny, new, 1950 Chevrolet parked in front of a banner heralding the familiar revolutionary slogan of the 1960's, "Al pasado no regresaremos": "we will not return to the past, not ever." In the background fly the flags of the neo-colonial empires: the US, the former USSR and Spain. Still further back in this landscape of many temporalities are the monuments to Cuba's independence of the late nineteenth century, and to the Cuban Republic era of the 1920's through the 1950's. Alvarez appears to be posing the question: to which past will Cuba return in the future?

Alvarez seems to have answered his own question in a recent series called *Havana Dollarscape*. There are six paintings in this series depicting US bills in 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 dollar denominations. The political iconography of this US currency is superimposed onto the Havana cityscape. For instance, in the painting entitled "20," we see Andrew Jackson's image in the foreground gazing out at the viewer. Behind him is an American car from the 1950's and Landluce's *mulatas* at market. In the far background the White House, a landmark of the US political landscape, is incongruously set into the Cuban tropical landscape. In front of the White House, a remnant of the colonial wall of Old Havana mediates between the foreground and background.

Ironically, in the actual Cuban landscape the former Cuban presidential palace which was transformed by the Revolution into the National Museum of the Cuban Revolution sits behind the remnant of the old city wall precisely where the White House is superimposed. Today the museum charges admission in dollars and is a popular tourist attraction. Thus the "20" and the rest of this series address the current return of problems associated with consumerism and culture, and the renewed presence of the US dollar as a dominant—and recently instituted *legal*—form of currency in Cuba.

In the work of Alvarez and Toirac, the rise of consumerism in Cuba is largely manifested as a re-emergence of the capitalist forms of advertising and the reprivatization of the economy by foreign investment. There also exists an emergence of work that deals with other topics where the presence of the past is manifested as a re-opening to tourism. For example, in Cuba *jineteo* refers to certain sorts of economic exchange associated with the collapse of a socialist economy and the increased foreign, tourist and general economic presence of others on the island. This is of interest in the fact that the term *jineteo* comes from the Spanish verb, *jinetear*, which literally means "to jockey". *Jineterismo*, then, can simply mean "providing basic tourist services." These might be chauffeur services by locals, guide services, or interpreters' services. However, *jineterismo* can also unfortunately refer to illicit sexual prostitution offered by women called *jineteras*. In a series like *Havana Dollarscape*, the potential confusion between tourism as a simple economic exchange, and tourism as a prostitution of one's own culture and identity "offered" to others, is seriously brought to the fore.

Alvarez and Toirac understand that power can be consolidated and perpetuated by linking ideology to the careful manipulation and orchestration of imagery. For political ideology and capitalist economies alike, power is so consolidated. Their art exposes this linkage by appropriating the methods common to revolutionary politics *and* commercial capitalism.

Although they do set the stage for the many concerns of the current situation of the Revolution coexisting with a

consumer attitude in Cuba, it would be naive to project the political or historical impact of contemporary Cuban artists such as Alvarez and Toirac at this time. However, there are conclusions which can be reached with some degree of certainty. Initially, I would say that the critical description of Cuban postmodern cultural production as "pseudo-postmodernism" is culturally biased and self-negating insofar as postmodernity in itself disavows a discourse of authenticity. Secondly, if we accept Frederic Jameson's description of postmodernity as an expression of the inner truth of the newly emergent social order of late capitalism, then Cuban postmodern cultural production can be understood as an expression of an equally new social order. This new order is defined by the disenchantment with late socialism, by a current post-utopian era in Cuba, and is characterized by the emergence, rise and dominance of consumer capitalist practices in contemporary Cuban culture.

It seems the reason that some critics view Cuban art as "pseudo-postmodern" lies in their own politics of interpretation in the formation of a discourse. Cuban art to this day continues to be wrongly described by the dialectical terms of the nationally authentic versus the culturally dependent. But cultural dependency in the late twentieth century is a highly problematic and relative phrase. In fact, the work of Alvarez and Toirac demonstrates that Cuba is not the hermetic, culturally isolated island some believe it to be. Cuba continues to be a crossroads between Old World and New; First World and Third, center and periphery and politics and aesthetics—and Cuban postmodern cultural production continues the dialectic that allows it to function in that way.

Frank Valdes is a student in the SMArchS program in the Department of Architecture at MIT.

ADVERTISEMENT ADVERTISEMENT ADVERTISEM

LE PORTRAIT OF THE COMMODITY AS A YOUNG IDEA SECTION thirty years on the

Portrait of the commodity

Thresholds

HOME DEPOT TABLO

The "ADVERTISEMENTS" presented throughout this issue are the work of Peter Laurence. Making use of both the image and its title, Laurence astutely references various canonical issues from architectural theory such as Laugier's primative hut, building technology under modernism, the relationship of architecture to commerce, and the critic/historian's role in reading architectural movements. The presence of Home Depot in architectural discourse is, like many of the themes addressed in this issue, a pivotal contemporary topic deserving of more broad and serious attention.

Peter Laurence studies architecture at Harvard Graduate School of Design. The Home Depot images are his preliminary research for a house in Greenville, South Carolina.

PUBLICLY ACQUIRED, PRIVATELY OWNED

BY MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

As an undergraduate student attending art school I concentrated in sculpture. As part of my education I was taught about "FORM-MAKING," the end result of which generally culminated in THE OBJECT—often exhibited in the student gallery or display cases.

I found this focus on THE OBJECT anti-climactic. In my sophomore year I started to produce work that moved out of the gallery and into "the public realm." Hardly a new idea, I began first by addressing architecture; by accentuating spaces that seemed mundane but nevertheless engaged viewers in their normal, everyday experiences. In working here I sought to destroy the viewer's anticipation in viewing artworks. Where the gallery sets up a stage, I instead worked with the element of surprise; worked to elicit a double take from the viewer. Artwork could be found and discovered, could create an adventure, thus challenge the authority of gallery presentation.

As part of this development of work outside of the gallery context, I tried to discover a way in which I could engage a public audience without relying on the fixed site. WHAT IS "THE PUBLIC REALM?" While the work I pursued within architecture certainly took viewers by surprise, it still had a very formal approach towards scale and material. My next step was to attempt to penetrate the borders of architecture and site by adding mobility to the work; A NOMADIC DEVICE. However, a vehicle was needed to provide this portability. WHAT IS "NOMADIC" IN OUR CULTURE? I still wanted to surprise the audience. I wanted to utilize camouflage and disguise as an opportunity to do so. Thus, it was imperative that I appropriate a pre-existing language. It was around this time, in 1992, that widespread concern was generated over the mass market image

of Joe Camel, mascot for Camel cigarettes. The Joe Camel image appearing on billboards, pamphlets, magazine ads and matchbooks brought out a general uneasiness in the public about the accessibility of such images. This brought the issues of the easy accessibility and circulation of the commodity to my attention as potential vehicles for another project.

Matchbook Sculptures: 1993.

At this point I decided to run an experiment. I went to a shop that sold cigarettes and took a handful of matchbooks, which are normally given away free of charge. ARE THESE OBJECTS "NOMADIC?" YES. DID I MAKE THEM, CREATE THEIR "FORM?" DEFINITELY NOT. I took these matches back to my studio and started to transform the inside portion. The fact that these objects were set up in the same format as a "book" provided me with the opportunity to conceal and surprise. I separated each match inside, and each was painted in different monochrome colors that echoed the scheme on the cover. In each book I engineered a pop-up mechanism that caused the matches to form FORMAL "MODERNIST CONSTRUCTIONS" once the book was opened. Because of the nature of this mechanism, the books could only be opened ninety degrees, forcing a pause in the normal use of such an object. This delay was precisely what I was looking for in contextualizing my work.

BUT WHERE WAS THE "PUBLIC REALM?" WHEN WOULD THE MATCHBOOK SCULPTURES BECOME "NOMADIC?" — WHEN THEY WERE USED AS A COMMODITY BY THE CONSUMER.

After producing nearly fifty of these "matchbook sculptures" I took them to smoke shops and placed them among the fully functional matchbooks that normally sit in boxes or bowls near the cash register. Smokers who received these books casually opened them without looking, only to realize first that these matchbooks did not fully open. This restriction was first met with frustration and confusion. Upon looking inside users were surprised to see these matches moving up and down with the opening and closing of the book, and their formation of "MODERNIST CONSTRUCTIONS" in the open position. Reactions varied. Often users would laugh and ask the vendor if this was a special promotion from the company. Others would examine the piece, smile, and tuck it away in their pockets.

These works, as public gestures, operated on several levels. The social activity of smoking was acknowledged in the interruption of the normal process of this routine. The commodity became special: a collectible. Once the property of mass consumer culture, the object itself, through its personalized transformation, indicated the very individual and intimate properties of its use. The matchbook, once a public, disposable commodity became a

privately owned novelty.

Styrofoam Cup Transformations: 1995.

The same questions about form-making that inspired the "matchbook sculptures" prompted me to pursue a new direction focusing entirely on form.

MY FEELINGS ABOUT CREATING FORM WERE THAT I HAD NOTHING TO SAY.

There were artists who developed their own formal conventions—a signature style distinctly their own. Sculptors like Henry Moore and Alexander Calder had a very real method and material in their work that characterized their pieces. I COULD LAY CLAIM TO NO SUCH MATERIAL, NO SUCH APPEARANCE. I had developed a fondness for the Duchampian ready-made, and was working with ideas of appropriation and transformation as an opportunity to deconstruct the pre-conceived attitudes towards those objects. FOR ME, STYROFOAM COFFEE CUPS ALREADY CHARACTERIZED A "BEAUTIFUL FORM." THE SHEER SIMPLICITY OF ITS TAPERED CYLINDRICAL FORM COMBINED WITH ITS FLAT WHITE MONOCHROME COLOR CREATED AN ALMOST ETHEREAL APPEARANCE. This object however had already been rightfully condemned due to its negative effect on the environment. I decided to explore a way in which the visual appearance of this mass produced commodity might be transformed, to amplify the beauty of the object, and momentarily halt the existing perception of this material as offensive. In this work, I preheated an oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. I placed the Styrofoam cups inside the oven over sequential intervals of time ranging from 5 to 30 seconds. Thus, the first transformation was a result of 350 degrees of heat distributed over 5 seconds of time, while the last transformation was a result of 350 degrees of heat distributed over 30 seconds of time. This process allowed me to pursue form in an indirect manner where I essentially divorced my hand from the work: any physical alteration of the materials occurred as a direct result of the process.

The Bottlecap Project: 1996.

The "matchbook sculptures" had provided me with a commodity that in its normal process of use created a moment of delay. The opening and closing of the book was an essential action in the use of this object. Years later, I BECAME INTERESTED IN OTHER OCCASIONS OF PAUSE CREATED BY THE PROCESS OF CONSUMPTION OF A COMMODITY. Once again, I relied heavily on the element of surprise, and decided to conceal my gesture.

THE BOTTLE CAPS THAT ARE USED ON VARIOUS PLASTIC BEVERAGE CONTAINERS IN THE UNITED STATES HAD ATTRACTED ME SINCE MY YOUTH. My first experience

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

with these white plastic caps involved the "under the cap" contests and sweepstakes run as promotions by the soda companies. I HAVE ALMOST ALWAYS SINCE CHECKED THE UNDERSIDE OF EACH CAP ON ANY BOTTLE OF SODA THAT I DRINK. The blue plastic wafer attached to the underside of each of these caps began to interest me. As an object, I found a certain elegance about this color being presented with a desirable beverage. The blue offset by the white cap created a fairly strong contrast and seemed to reference water or sky in its tone. I began to consider the possibilities of this blue plane as being a *tableau*. The plane's mere presence introduced a "ground plane," and as such could stand in for a formal gesture on my part.

I finished the gesture by adding things to it. I started this project by first installing a patch of green, using fake miniature grass. This divided the circle. The blue and green playing off each other seemed to set up a background that could be used in 3-D. Thus, I started to include other miniature elements: trees, people, architecture. THE CAP BECAME THE CONTAINER FOR A MINIATURE DIORAMA. I developed a technique that allowed the cap to screw back into place, essentially hiding the gesture.

The action of twisting off the cap was therefore acknowledged in the same way as the opening of the matchbook: a place of delay; a moment of pause—THE SITE, TODAY, OF A "PUBLIC REALM."

Placing this gesture among the normal circulation of the commodity proved problematic. If I had taken these bottle caps and distributed them among drinks inside a store, this would be considered product tampering. The safety seal would be broken and, although non toxic materials were used, I would be liable.

I WAS, HOWEVER, DETERMINED TO CONTEXTUALIZE THIS PROJECT SO THAT IT COULD REALIZE ITS MOMENT(S) OF "BEING IN THE PUBLIC REALM."

I decided that my best opportunity would be to place the caps among drinks that would be presented "NOT-FOR-RESALE" and consumed communally at meetings or other gatherings that are typically catered. I would provide the drinks and leave the seal broken, at least to announce that the beverage had in fact been opened. The project made its first appearance on the MIT campus. I replaced the caps on drinks provided for the final semester review of student work in the Department of Architecture (where I provided Pepsi, Mountain Dew, 7-UP, and Lipton's Brisk Iced Tea). At the Departmental Faculty Meeting in Architecture I provided—upon request from an inside collaborator—Poland Springs Seltzer, Perrier, Schweppes Tonic Water, Schweppes Ginger Ale. A hidden video camera was used in this project to provide documentation of the reactions.

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

Publically Acquired; Privately Owned.

The object, mass marketed and produced on a grand scale, is made available to a general public. It's appearance is public through logo and icon. Once purchased, the domain of this object shrinks. It becomes an individual object related to the purchaser, privately owned by the consumer. Appropriating the moments of consumer contact with the commodity and exploiting them as a site; using their own formal structures in place of designing my own; accepting their prevalence as being perhaps "more public" or at least more frequent occurrences than public gatherings themselves, are most definitely nomadic strategies. The use of commodity in a consumer culture has provided me with a fertile and potent space in which to work. As an artist dealing with public issues, I have come to recognize the commercially available object as a mobile public device which maintains very private moments in its consumption.

The Plastic Lawn Flamingo: Portrait of a Commodity

BY MEDINA LASANSKY

Designed by Don Featherstone in 1957 to grace the front lawns of suburban America, the pink plastic lawn flamingo quickly became a familiar feature of the American landscape. While it was intended as a seasonal item with a relatively short shelf-life, the flamingo has been the lawn ornament industry's best-selling item for the past forty years. Over half a million pink flamingos are produced each year by Union Products, a plastics company based in Leominster, Massachusetts. While this is only one of several companies which produce lawn flamingos, it is the producer of the original Featherstone bird—which today comes in its own retro-style collector's box bearing the artist's signature.[1]

Although millions of plastic lawn ornaments sell each year—channeled directly to the masses through chain stores such as Sears, K-Mart, Montgomery Wards, Target, and Stuarts—the industry remains relatively small. There are only four companies producing such items in the United States and Canada and they sell almost entirely to a North American market. Union Products is the largest of these four. And due to the intensity of Featherstone's activity during his forty-two year tenure as the company's only artist, he alone has been largely responsible for populating our yards with these familiar manufactured vernacular creatures. Among others, his *oeuvre* of sculpture includes the all-time favorite illuminated flying reindeer, the toy Christmas soldiers, the swan and donkey planters, and the mother duck with baby ducklings. He is the creative individual behind what is typically assumed to be an anonymous plastic phenomenon. While supervising a workshop of 200 people, he responds to the demands of both consumer and dealer.

Despite mass-production, Featherstone creates images directly for his clients, modifying his products according to their demands, needs, and traditions — at times even re-articulating regionalized trends into national phenomena. For example, when the NAACP voiced their concern that the skin color of the Black Santa Claus was too light, Featherstone created a Santa with a darker face. In 1993 when a group of Massachusetts feminists argued that the domestic imaging of Santa's wife sweeping was oppressive, Featherstone removed Mrs. Claus' broom. He created the blue flamingo in the late 1980's for the residents of towns where the pink flamingo had been banned by neighborhood beautification committees and aesthetic watch groups. In 1996 he introduced the Snowmingo, a white flamingo which could be purchased during the winter season when stores refused to market the warm-weather pink one. Multicolored plastic "granny fannies" were created to capitalize on the wide-spread popularity of home-painted plywood and pressed-board cut-outs depicting women bending over exposing their bloomers. Similarly, in 1994 Featherstone created plastic eggs with built-in loops to facilitate the creation of "egg trees" — a long-standing Easter tradition in areas of German settlement which had begun to gain popularity elsewhere across the country. Finally, in 1996 he introduced unpainted "concrete-colored" decorations which imitated the appearance of the much loved concrete lawn ornament yet without its inconvenient permanence (the weight of these objects precluded the arrangement of seasonal *tableaux*) and relatively high-cost.

Also influencing the design process is the "buyer" — the individual who contracts to purchase lawn ornaments for retail store chains at the annual trade shows. These shows serve as immense art galleries — venues where artists and manufacturers such as Featherstone and Union Products can display their work to potential clients.[2] Logically, these buyers/dealers are key to the successful mass-dissemination of the image. They not only make purchases for an entire chain of stores, but they provide Featherstone with suggestions as to how to change old products and create new ones. In their capacity to analyze how products sell, they are able to alert Featherstone to changing trends such as color and subject preferences, as well

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as recent market successes and failures. In this way the buyer/dealer becomes an arbiter of the image, helping the sculptor to modify his figures to satisfy the perceived tastes and trends of a large consumer market. It was in fact a dealer who recently suggested to Featherstone that he expand the line of holiday lawn ornaments to include Thanksgiving figures, which are the company's latest addition.

The market for plastic lawn art was born during the 1950s. Plastics technologies adapted to serve a wide range of peace-time consumer uses allowed the mass-production of relatively durable, inexpensive, three-dimensional, highly colorful plastic ornaments.[3] A prosperous economy contributed to the successful growth of chain stores which provided the nationwide marketplace for these new consumer goods. The rapid growth of home ownership and a preference for the self-contained single-family house with its front-yard facing onto the road provided a theater for the display of yard art and the increased commercialization of holidays presented the occasions to exhibit the assortment of largely seasonal images.[4] This collection and display of semi-exotic, spectacular and amusing plastic lawn sculpture was the modern catholic version of the inhabited garden grottos and follies of courtly Renaissance and Baroque landscapes. Placed in carefully constructed groupings which were meant to entertain, astonish, and amuse, plastic lawn decorations — a more affordable variation of the Victorian cast iron and even rarer aluminum lawn art — contributed to the genre of sculpture which celebrated the playful relationship between artifice and nature.[5]

Don Featherstone

Yet, more than the fine pedigree, its multivalent and multifunctional nature is the secret to its success. The flamingo is simultaneously an object of celebration, derision, and hatred. While passionate lawn ornament fans carefully create elaborate front-yard *tableaux* (often arranging their flocks among a variety of props), others sabotage and steal the creatures (a flamingo kidnapped from a Georgia yard was returned only after its owner made a public appeal on National Public Radio). There are even town decorating and beautification committees, neighborhood associations and historic districts which lobby to have lawn flamingos outlawed as aesthetically offensive. This debate has prompted both individual and organized retaliation—most of which assumes the form of satirical commentary on the aesthetic prejudice against these plastic creatures. The response is varied, from businesses which will "flamingo" the yard of an unsuspecting recipient to celebrate a special occasion; to a popular t-shirt which depicts the flamingo and bears the phrase "ruin the neighborhood—stick 'em in your yard;" to the inclusion of a "lawn ornament drill team" which twirled pink flamingos like batons at the annual "Gross National Parade" in Washington, DC in 1994. While the flamingo has come to symbolize the definition of poor (working-class) taste, it has also been adopted by gay culture as symbolic of their own disenfranchisement.[6] And yet this association, firmly set up in John Water's 1972 classic cult film *Pink Flamingos*, has not precluded the ornament from being appropriated by other cultural groups, including the mid-1980s, yuppie *Miami Vice* watching consumers who were drawn to the flamingo as a trendy kitsch item.[7] Easily recognized, and

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readily lampooned, the flamingo has acquired the rhetoric of a national cultural icon. Manufacturers such as Saturn Corporation have even begun to capitalize on the high visibility and common language of the plastic bird by using its image to sell merchandise — as was evident in the advertising of the Saturn *SCI* in 1996.

Featherstone never envisioned that his flamingo would serve as a vehicle for the expression of such diverse interests. It was certainly not designed with that in mind. Nor did he ever predict its fame. Neither Union Products, nor the stores which sell these flamingos, have ever mounted an advertising campaign. For that reason these ornaments are a consumer culture anomaly — they are a commercial success without the aid of commercialization. Stories of flamingo sightings which appear in local newspapers across the country allow Featherstone to unobtrusively monitor (and even contribute to) the continuous reinvention of the bird. As documented by his personal clipping file, the aura surrounding his flamingo has brought him a certain amount of mainstream recognition as well. He and his birds have been the subject of multiple interviews for the popular press, including *People Magazine*, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsweek*. To commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the flamingo he appeared on the *Today Show* as well as *Sixty Minutes*. In these newspaper and magazine articles Featherstone is frequently referred to as a "genius creator"—a title which, while he finds it amusing, he does not disregard. He now incorporates his signature at the bottom of each mold in order to distinguish his "originals" from the flourishing trade of fakes and knock-offs made by his aggressive "followers."

Perhaps for a variety of reasons, the design of the pink flamingo has been overlooked in discussions of art production. In its material, color and technology, the lawn ornament is unlike traditionally-studied fine art. Made from inexpensive plastic, it appears tawdry to many — far from being the precious product of delicate, labor-intensive craftsmanship. Perceived as ugly, if not offensive by the historians of taste, its merit as a form of visual culture has remained largely unrecognized. Its ephemeral nature has also perhaps precluded it from entering into the mainstream art historical discourse. And unlike the studied art of the cultural elite, lawn ornaments are the vernacular art of working- and middle-class yards. In its replication through mass-production, the lawn ornament initially appears anonymous and ordinary. In this anonymity it seems to lack a genius creator and is therefore excluded from a canon of unique masterpieces set into a historical framework predicated upon the biographical narrative first established by Giorgio Vasari. As a product of a commercial world, plastic lawn art initially appears to lack easy categorization by style, type, iconography or patron — categorization which has been viewed as crucial to the discussion of fine art. Situated within the semi-public realm of the private landscape, the lawn ornament defies classification. It is both public and private art while assuming the traditional character of neither. Finally, an understanding of its emotional expressiveness and seemingly non-intellectual decorativeness does not appear to require academic training. Because of its immediacy there appears to be nothing to decipher. In fact, its humor, immediacy, and magical exoticism is difficult to articulate in phrases with footnotes.

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In both iconography and function, the lawn ornament can be situated within some of the long-standing traditions surrounding the processes and expectations of visual culture: images are modified or newly created according to a client's/patron's wishes and needs; multiple meanings, at times ambiguous and conflicting, are able to coexist in each image as artistic intention often remains subservient to the meaning endowed through use and personalization; mass reception and group construction of meaning make these vernacular products provocative within the everyday experience of a wide audience; popularity makes these ornaments the subject of worship, imitation, quotation, thievery, collection and, under "aesthetic legislation"—rejection and neglect. In all of this we see a nuanced form of image-making which must be understood within a complex network of societal relationships. Thus the plastic lawn ornament functions, in its creation and interpretation, like any traditionally-studied art object.

The case of the enduring lawn flamingo underscores that there is much that is shared between visual consumer culture and fine art. These are phenomena which resonate with intense similarities—sharing a language of creative cause and effect. We should be provoked to consider how that language is used by other familiar forms of mass-manufactured art and architecture including commercialized versions and quotations of canonical "high art." Such consumer images can conceal surprisingly varied lives, multiple articulations, and serial reinventions beneath their formulaic appearances. Their presence challenges historians and critics to be alert and creative in their analysis.

notes

[1]The information regarding Union Products and Don Featherstone's design of lawn ornaments comes from several interviews I conducted with Mr. Featherstone during 1995 and 1996. Information about the other manufacturers comes from interviews I conducted with Jim Rawls of the manufacturing division of Empire Plastics; Claire Henderson, the co-owner of Tucker Plastics Incorporated, and Larry Foster, the Vice President for Marketing at Lawnware. Unlike Union Products, none of the other three companies have company artists.

[2]The trade fairs, held in Chicago each summer and in New York each winter, serve as vital resources for the manufacturers as well.

[3]For a discussion on the plastic industry see Jeffrey L. Meikle, *American Plastic: a Cultural History* (New Brunswick, 1995).

[4]In the past few years there have been several good studies on the development of the yard surrounding the single-family detached house. See for example, Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn. A History of an American Obsession* (Washington, D.C., 1994). For a discussion of the commercialization of holidays in the United States beginning in the late nineteenth century, the role of various industries in promoting the celebration of holidays, and the opportunities these holidays provided for the creation of new consumer goods see, Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Commercialization of the Calendar: American Holidays and the Culture of Consumption, 1870-1930," *The Journal of American History*, December 1991, Vol. 78, pp. 887-916.

[5]For a discussion of grottos, see e.g. Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Caves. Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (New York, 1982).

[6]See Jan and Michael Stern's definitive *Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*, New York, 1990; and John Waters, *Shock Value, a Tasteful Book About Bad Taste* (New York, 1995).

[7]For one of the most synthetic discussions on yard ornamentation see: Colleen Sheehy, "The Flamingo in the Garden: Artifice, Aesthetics, and Popular Taste in American Yard Art," Ph.D. dissert. (University of Minnesota, Department of American Studies, 1991).

Medina Lasansky is completing her Ph.D. in Art and Architectural History at Brown University. Her work on mass-produced lawn ornaments is a part of a larger study on the aesthetic legislation of the built environment.

TOWARDS A GLOBAL PEOPLE'S MUSEUM

The New Perishable Gallery

[A People's Project]

A vast *anti-monument* initiated in the beginning of the 90's, part imaginary museum, theoretical object and mental experiment, *The New Perishable Gallery* integrates theoretical musings derived from a variety of sources. The project is intrinsically multi-disciplinary. It addresses issues of **multiculturalism, globalisation, reification** and **representation,** but also of *collective memory*, of *identity*, *spirituality* and *temporality*. In practice, it translates into a number of collaborations with professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds: anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, historians, art critics, artists, architects, writers, advertisers, infographists, actors, programmers, psychics...

Initiated in the beginning of the Nineties, ***The New Perishable Gallery*** ***(NPG)*** is primarily defined as an *international portrait gallery*, the components of which are `supermarket products`.

Operating Principles:

Perishable *products,* the packaging of which features realistic representations of human beings, are all eligible to insertion in the ***NPG.***

The *products* (`packaging + contents`) are extracted from their economic cycles to enter the ***NPG*** as *portraits* and in so doing are submitted to their own natural organic life span. *They are never to be replaced.*

Each product is treated as a *unique, individual* **subject** objectified through **representation** and is given adequate care. Such a constituent is referred to as a *portrait/product*.

This process is termed *de*-**reification**.

Genesis:

From its inception the ***NPG*** was intended as

an alternative to the polarized and doctrinal debates generated by multiculturalism throughout the Western world. The original concern is with the problematics of **representation**, particularly with respect to cultural otherness. This essential issue is considered here through **consumerism** and its contingent **globalization**: *the path connecting representation, objectification and reification is that which leads multinationals to multiculturalism.*

Methods:

The ***NPG*** is an attempt at dealing with the difficulty inherent in substituting **material culture** (objects) for **cultural agents** (people). It also deals with the delicate issue of **objectification** as it applies to **representation**.

The only kind of cultural artifact that can legitimately be decontextualised in a museum is the ***commodity*** (given the relative universality of its relationship to the *customer/viewer*). Furthermore it appears that the only kind of representation that can safely be exploited is that generated by the *advertising world* (because of the universality of its hidden agenda.)

By conflating the two, one is equipped with a powerful object of study (the supermarket *portrait/product*,) at the interface of several areas of contention. It seemed to be an adequate choice for a collection. To further complicate issues it was decided that all collectibles should be ***perishable*** and thus set up an intrinsically paradoxical curatorial function: preserving in order to better allow for decay.

Perishability serves here as a metaphor for mortality, construed not as *finality* but as the vital expression of the metamorphosis from one state to another.

This amounts to a turning against itself of the "humanism" of the ***commodity***, by taking it seriously (iconoclastic iconolatry).

It represents a natural extension to the "***de-reification***" process at work.

Illusions, Virtualities & Lies that tell the Truth:

The three following domains are of particular interest to the project:

1) **Imaging & Advertising** (*Stereotyping Internationally*)

selection from
"The New Perishable Gallery."
"white people"

Considering seriously the imaging and symbolizing functions of advertising in a society's process of self-representation.

2) **Museology and Ideology** (*Representing Multiculturally*)

Investigating the ethical difficulties currently facing the Museum in its attempt to preserve, represent and legitimate.

3) **Heritage** (*Remembering Cross-Culturally*)

The alternative constitutions of (visual) collective memory. This implies a comparative, cross-cultural study of attitudes towards cultural heritage, value and preservation and, by extension, towards *change* and *continuity*, *transience* and *permanence*.

Areas of Activities of *The New Perishable Gallery* (1991-97)

a) Constitution and cataloguing of an exhaustive collection, global by definition. This collection has two embodiments: one physical (the constituents in "flesh and blood") and one virtual (the Global Imaginary Museum created on the World Wide Web and permeable to interactions).

b) Presentation of part of the collection to the public as a physical portrait gallery, in which the gaze of the portraits/products objectifies the viewer.

c) Development of a hermetically sealed (audienceless) museum in which the portraits/products themselves become their own public. This is a logical extension of the substitution of objects for people (the NPG as Community).

d) Collective Memory: construction of a monument (Museum/Mausoleum) to house the entire collection for posterity. This (anti) monument is to function visually as an architectural sign (exterior/hardness/permanence) and mentally as a space of transformation (interior/softness/transience).

e) Establishment of a data base on the identity of the *models* used for the portraits/products (Meta-Community). Biographical data is added to this information thereby contributing to the sociological aspect of the project. This human dimension is also conceived to contrast the ***real*** time of an individual's life to the ***artificial*** time of fashion (that which determines the esthetics of the portraits/products and its contingent decoding), to the ***organic*** time of the perishable contents.

f) Running of the NPG as a dating service, both on the Community and Meta-Community levels.

Handsome plastic surgeon, 42 yrs, seeks serious relationship with a young, rich and attractive lady.

g) Computer simulation of an intelligent portrait gallery which keeps track of the length of time a portrait/product has been entered in it and ages accordingly (*in real time and eternally*) the image on its packaging. While creating a ***synthetic*** time dimension distinct from the previous three this also pushes to its logical conclusion - and *beyond* - the purported humanism of the commodity.

h) Systematic and rigorous submission of the portraits/products to phrenological analysis and appropriate processing of this information.

i) Encouraging dialogues between portraits/products. Animate them to speak with the voice of their respective models.

j) Implementation of the autonomous, self-consuming product. In much the same way as the product on the shelf substitutes itself for any sales person (by "talking" directly to the consumer,) so does it substitute itself here for any consumer.

k) Creation of *hybrid* products. This is achieved by joining two or more portraits together and by mixing the respective contents. Successful choices are motivated by geo-political considerations (on origins,) aesthetics (appearances) and chemical suitability (of the ingredients.)

l) De-alienating commodities by inventing them a "death" and an *after-life*.

m) Formulation of a holistic approach to commodity fetishism, through its knowing and radical spiritualising.(*Hyperfetishism*)

n) Development of the packaging/content - body/soul metaphor into the realm of *animism*, ideated here as a space of possible cultural *resistance*.

o) Diffusion of the concept (the NPG as mental construct), omnipresent and siteless.

p) Scientific investigation of the *sensual immanence/spiritual transcendence* dichotomy, particularly in instances where it tends to collapse (as seems to be the case in the aesthetic experience).

q) The mapping out of a set of correspondences between multiculturalism and Interfaith movements.

And more.

Guillaume Paris is an artist currently living in Rome. He has studied engineering, art and anthropology. His work in a variety of media is particularly concerned with the ideas of change, adaptability and heterogeneity.

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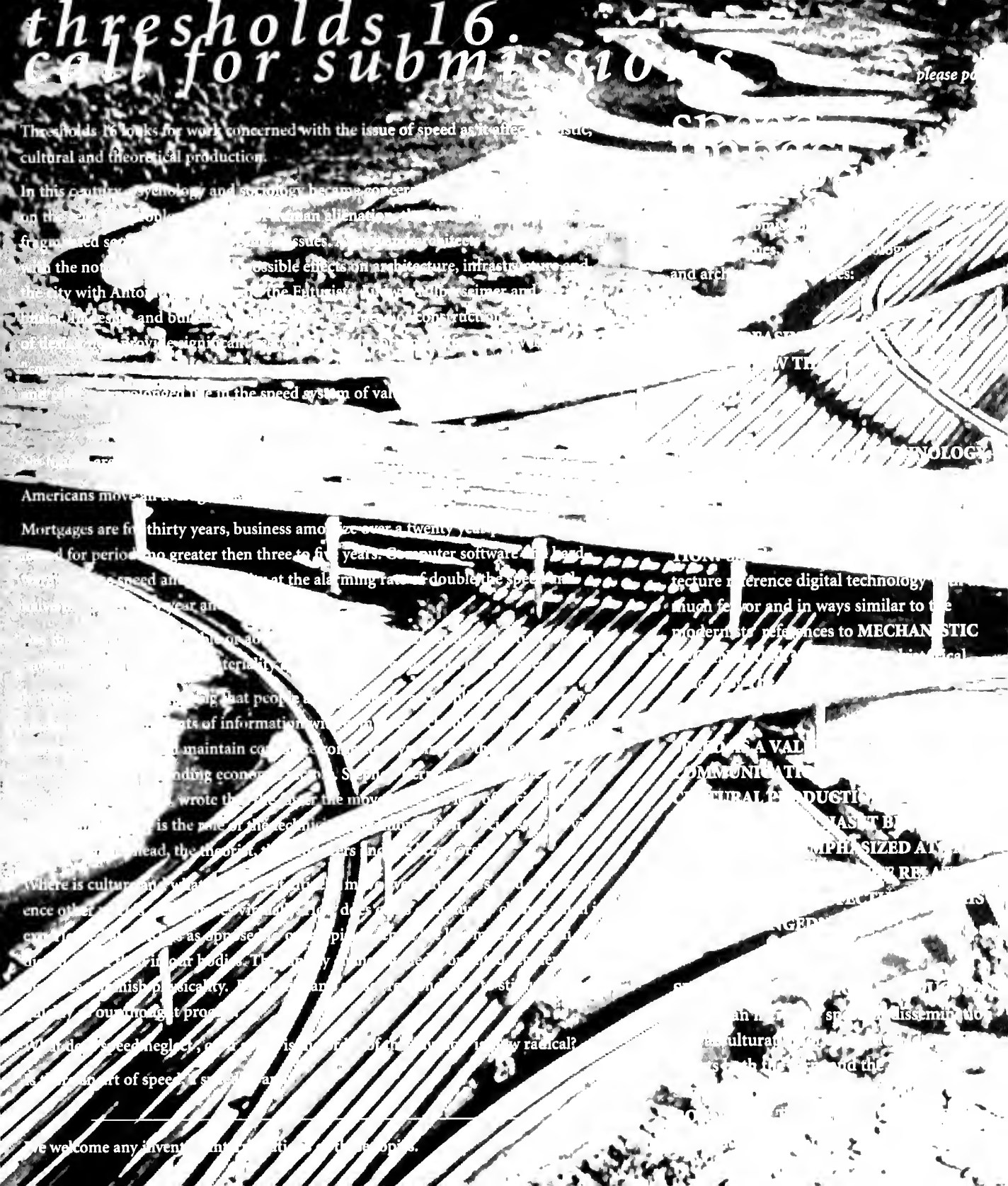

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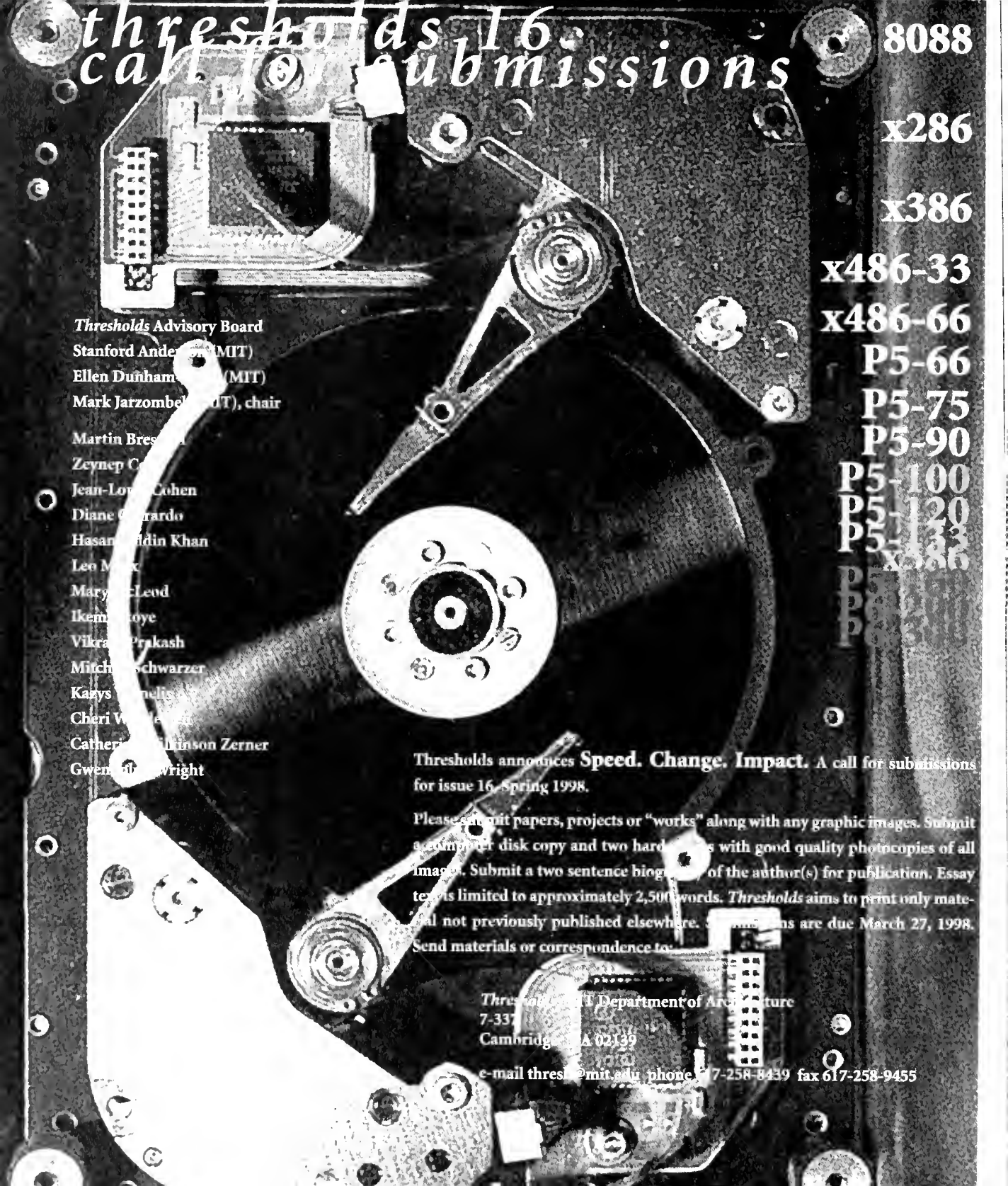

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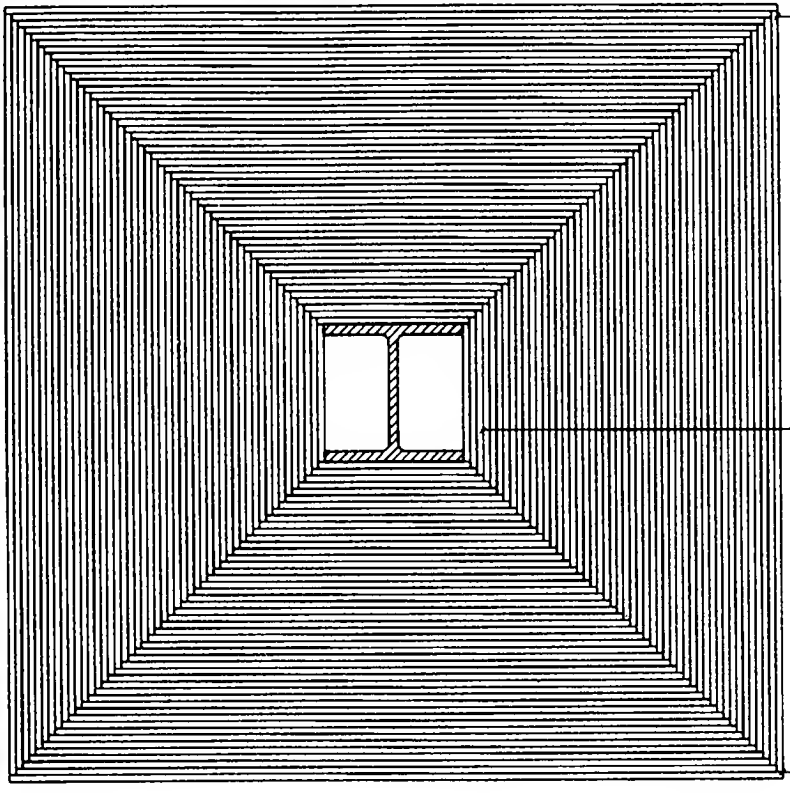

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